From Grasping to Emptiness – Excursions into the Thought-world of the Pāli Discourses (2)

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Introduction

The present book is based on revised versions of entries originally published in the Encyclopaedia of Buddhism, Sri Lanka. It forms the second volume of my "Excursions into the Thought-world of the Pāli discourses", complementing the previously published "From Craving to Liberation" (Anālayo 2009).

The selection of articles in the present book begins by examining central doctrinal terms such as grasping, personality view, and right view. Next I explore the significance of *saṅkhāra*s, followed by surveying thoughts and wise attention. Then I consider the theme of insight in detail, before turning to its complement in the development of concentration. Minor themes taken up in the wake of concentration are seclusion and letting go. The significance of emptiness forms the conclusion to my explorations.

While I have tried to arrange the above topics in a meaningful manner, the essays in the present book were originally written as independent contributions and thus can be read in whatever sequence the reader may prefer, as they do not necessarily build on each other.

My main concern throughout is on exploring a particular term from the perspective of the early Pāli discourses. Other sources − be these later Pāli works, Chinese parallels, or secondary publications on the matter at hand − are taken into consideration only in a minimal way. In several cases, this has made me take out more detailed examinations of positions taken in the *Abhidhamma* etc., or references to scholarly publications that were found in the original Encyclopaedia entries. In this way, I hope to maintain a continuous emphasis in the

present publication on the position taken in the early discourses and on what appears to me to be of practical relevance.

I also dispense with footnoting, use round brackets to provide references and square brackets in translated passages to mark additional terms that are not found in the original. Pāli expressions or quotes, which I have tried to keep to a minimum, appear in italics. I hope that in this way, without sacrificing academic rigour, I am able to present material of easy access for those who approach Buddhism as a system of purification and mental development.

To conclude this introduction, I would like to express my gratitude to all those who have helped by commenting on this collection in its draft stages, to the editor of the Encyclopaedia of Buddhism for giving me copyright permission, and to Bhikkhu Bodhi for having laid the foundation to all my writings through his kind tuition. Needless to say, I am solely responsible for any remaining errors.

1. Grasping / *Upādāna*

The range of meaning of the term *upādāna* covers two main aspects: In a more active sense, *upādāna* stands for "grasping" or "clinging" (two terms I will use alternatively to render *upādāna*). In a more passive sense, the same term refers to that which is grasped or clung to, in the sense of its "basis" or "substrata", at times also signifying "supply" or "fuel".

Representative of the tendency of the mind to cling or grasp, *upādāna* constitutes the ninth factor in the twelve-link series of dependent arising (*paṭicca samuppāda*), where it arises in dependence on craving and leads on to becoming or existence, *bhava*. As the conditioning force for continued existence, *upādāna* stands for grasping at sensual pleasures, at views, at rules and observances, and at a doctrine of self (MN I 51). In what follows, I will take up each of these four aspects in turn.

1.1 Grasping at Sensual Pleasures

Of the four types of grasping, perhaps the most self-evident manifestation of *upādāna* is clinging to sensual pleasures. The theme of sensual pleasures is given considerable attention in the thought-world of early Buddhism, reflected in the circumstance that the discourses tackle this theme from several related angles.

The lure of sensuality causes the arising of sensual desire, *kāmacchanda*, which constitutes one of the lower fetters that bind beings to continuous migration in the round of existence (DN III 234). The same lure of sensuality is also responsible

for sensual lust, which in the form of an underlying tendency, *kāmarāgānusaya*, is already present in a newborn baby (DN III 254). The dire results of craving for sensuality, *kāmataṇhā*, are comparable to the case of a leper who cauterises his wounds over a fire and scratches them: he experiences momentary relief through an act that aggravates his condition (MN I 507). Hence *kāmupādāna*, clinging to sensual pleasures, has a broad compass and its removal is a crucial requirement for being able to progress on the path to liberation.

The first in a series of stark imageries in the *Potaliya-sutta* compares sensual pleasures to meatless bones that are not able to satisfy a dog's hunger, however much the dog may gnaw at them. Another simile in the same discourse describes how a bird has gotten hold of a piece of meat but is immediately attacked by other birds who try to get the same piece of meat as well – the bird will have to let go of its prey quickly to avoid harm and injury. Again, sensual pleasures are like holding a blazing torch against the wind – one inevitably will get scorched; or like being dragged by strong men towards a glowing charcoal pit, with no chance to escape the bitter end of being thrown into this pit. The illusory nature of sensual pleasures are like images seen in a dream; or like borrowed goods with which one may be parading the streets until the owners arrive and force one to return these goods to them. The last image in the *Potaliya-sutta* describes climbing a tree in search of fruit, only to find that someone else is cutting down the tree – one risks severe injury unless one descends quickly (MN I 364).

The predicament that results from sensual pleasures is also taken up in the *Mahādukkhakkhandha-sutta* from a realistic angle. The discourse depicts in detail the toil and suffering often required to make a living, as well as the gruesome conse-

quence of quarrelling and warfare, all of which the discourse presents as results of wanting to satisfy sensual desires (MN I 85).

These images reflect the importance of overcoming clinging to sensual pleasures, a task that requires sustained effort during one's progress on the path to liberation. Yet, besides the demanding task of going beyond the lure of sensuality, other modes of grasping also need to be overcome.

1.2 Grasping at Views

The problems that result from grasping at views, *diṭṭhupādāna*, are a prominent theme in the *Aṭṭhakavagga* of the *Suttanipāta*. Thus the *Duṭṭhaṭṭhaka-sutta* highlights that it is attachment to one's own views that makes it so difficult to relinquish them (Sn 781 and 785). According to the *Paramaṭṭhaka-sutta*, the cause for unending quarrelling is none other than high esteem for one's own view and the tendency to consequently look down on any other view (Sn 796-797). As the *Pasūra-sutta* points out, some delight in verbal debate and treat others as fools, hoping to gain victory and fearing defeat (Sn 824-828). Yet, if one were a fool simply by dint of holding a different view, the *Cūlaviyuha-sutta* remarks, then all debating recluses should be reckoned fools (Sn 880 and 890). As the same discourse points out, dogmatic upholding of one's own view is in the end just a manifestation of conceit (Sn 889).

The problem caused by grasping at views is that "the dogmatist wishes to safeguard his view at whatever cost, because the refutation of his views means to him defeat and self degradation" (Premasiri 1972: 21).

Thus it is precisely grasping in the form of identification with a particular view that leads to dogmatic adherence and

various measures to protect the view, to unwillingness to let go of it even when faced with compelling evidence. As a discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* explains, due to being bound by views and being obsessed by them, recluses continue to quarrel with each other (AN I 66). Since to hold any view dogmatically will inevitably lead to conflict with those who have different views, the only real solution is to let go of grasping at views (MN I 499). The need to let go of such grasping might even be of relevance in relation to Buddhist views, in the sense of needing to give up any dogmatic adherence and identification with them.

A problem with this suggestion could appear to be implicit in a passage in the *Cūḷasīhanāda-sutta* (MN I 66). According to this discourse, non-Buddhist recluses and Brahmins had insight into grasping at views. Ñāṇavīra (1987/2001: 481) comments that, since right view is found only in the Buddha's teaching and thus beyond the scope of understanding of non-Buddhist recluses and Brahmins, they could not have insight into grasping at views if such grasping were to include right view.

Yet, the passage in the *Cūḷasīhanāda-sutta* may only intend the problem of grasping at one's own views. That is, insight into grasping at views would not require knowledge of the contents of views held by others. What such insight needs is recognition of the tendency to grasp at one's own view.

Besides, if someone dogmatically asserts his or her position, it would be possible to recognize this attitude as a manifestation of grasping even if one does not fully understand the content of what is being asserted.

Thus the non-Buddhist recluses and Brahmins would be able to understand the problem of grasping at views without needing to understand Buddhist views. That is, the *Cūḷasīhanāda-*

sutta need not pose an obstacle to considering the problem of grasping at views as being of relevance even for adherents of Buddhism.

The *Alagaddūpama-sutta* in fact warns against wrongly grasping the Buddha's teaching, which it compares to taking hold of a snake by its tail, instead of seizing it by the neck (MN I 133). Attempting to catch a snake in such an unskilful way will result in getting bitten. Instead, the same discourse advises, the *Dhamma* should be seen as a raft for crossing over to the shore of liberation (MN I 135), not as something to be clung to for its own sake.

The same pragmatic stance, exemplified in the simile of the raft, would also be relevant to the theme of rules and observances.

1.3 Grasping at Rules and Observances

The implications of the term *sīlabbata*, the object of the third type of grasping, can best be ascertained by turning to the *Kukkuravatika-sutta*. This discourse uses the terms "rule", *sīla*, and "observance", *vata* – which make up the compound *sīlabbata* – in a description of contemporary ascetics that had taken up the rule and observance of behaving like a dog or a cow (MN I 387). The discourse describes that on meeting the Buddha the ascetic who was following the observance of a dog sat down and curled himself up like a dog. The commentary informs us that the other was in the habit of eating grass together with cows. Such and other types of rules and observances were apparently undertaken in ancient India in the belief that they would lead to purification or to rebirth in heaven (cf. e.g. MN I 102).

The task of going beyond grasping at rules and observances, however, appears to have a broader scope than just avoiding such imitation of animals or similar modes of behaviour. In a verse in the *Dhammapada*, Buddhist monks are also encouraged to go beyond rules and observances (Dhp 271). This suggests that this type of grasping can become a problem even for Buddhist monastics. In fact, a discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* points out that rules and observances in themselves can be either wholesome or unwholesome (AN I 225). Thus the problem are not just certain rules and observances as such, but much rather the act of grasping at or clinging to them in a way that has unwholesome effects.

1.4 Grasping at a Doctrine of Self

Grasping at a doctrine of self, *attavādupādāna*, is according to the *Cūḷasīhanāda-sutta* beyond the ken of other recluses and Brahmins. Though these may recognize the predicament inherent in the other three types of grasping, insight into the problem posed by grasping at a doctrine of self is a unique characteristic of the Buddha's teaching (MN I 67).

The Chinese parallels to the *Cūḷasīhanāda-sutta* differ from the Pāli version in as much as, instead of referring to clinging to "a doctrine of self", they simply speak of clinging to "a self" (T I 463a7; T I 591a22; T II 644a16). The corresponding expression *ātmopādāna* occurs in a Sanskrit fragment parallel to a discourse from the *Nidāna-saṃyutta* (Tripāṭhī 1962: 43).

This alternative reading would considerably broaden the scope of the fourth type of grasping from the upholding of doctrines regarding a self, something that is left behind with stream-entry, to any type of grasping at notions of an 'I', a subtle type of clinging only overcome with the attainment of full awakening.

The notion of grasping at a doctrine of self does in fact result in a problem when considering the gradual removal of grasping that takes place with the various levels of awakening. Grasping at wrong views, grasping at rules and observances and grasping at a doctrine of self are all left behind at stream-entry, when the fetters of doubt, of dogmatic adherence to rules and observances and of personality view are overcome, and when right view has become a matter of personal experience. Grasping at sensuality would be left behind with the attainment of non-return, when the fetter of sensual desire is eradicated. From this perspective, already a non-returner would have successfully overcome the four types of *upādāna*.

Ñāṇatiloka (1952/1988: 216) highlights this problem, commenting that in this way the "traditional fourfold division of clinging is not quite satisfactory [since this would imply that] the Anāgāmī is entirely free from the ... four kinds of *upādāna*". This is, however, not the case. Several passages refer to the remainder of *upādāna* of a non-returner. Such references occur in the context of depicting a mode of practice that has the potential of leading to non-returning or else to full awakening. In the case of a non-returner, final knowledge here and now is not reached since there is a remainder of *upādāna* left (e.g. MN I 63).

The way the above mentioned Chinese and Sanskrit parallel versions formulate the fourth type of grasping would provide a solution to this problem, as it would include any clinging to a notion of an 'I'. The *anattā* teaching is in fact of continuous relevance beyond the attainment of stream-entry and thus goes further than the denial of a permanent self in the form this was apparently upheld by some of the Buddha's contemporaries. Besides denying such self-notions, contemplation of *anattā* also functions as a meditative strategy for uncovering subtle

identifications, in the sense of any form of holding on to a sense of 'I'.

The persistence of such a subtle type of grasping at a sense of 'I' in a non-returner is the theme of the *Khemaka-sutta*. This discourse clarifies that even though a non-returner has certainly realized that none of the five aggregates [affected by] clinging can be reckoned as a self, nevertheless a trace of the sense of 'I' in regard to the five aggregates still remains (SN III 130).

By way of illustration, the discourse describes a dirty and soiled cloth that has been cleaned with the help of cleaning salt, lye and cow dung. After being rinsed in water the cloth has become clean, yet, a remainder of the smell of the cleaning salt, lye and cow dung still pervades the cloth. Hence even though the cloth is already clean, to complete the process of purification it still needs to be kept in a perfumed casket until this last remnant of smell has also disappeared.

Another simile in the same discourse illustrates how a subtle clinging to a sense of 'I' can remain even when the not-self nature of each of the five aggregates has been well realized. For this purpose, the discourse takes up the example of the scent of a lotus. Just as the sense of 'I' remains even though it cannot be identified as belonging to any of the five aggregates, so too the scent of a lotus cannot be identified as belonging to the petals or the stalk or the pistils, as it belongs to the flower as a whole (SN III 130).

That even the most subtle sense of an 'I' should be reckoned as a form of grasping comes to the fore in another simile that forms part of a penetrative instruction which led to the stream-entry of Ānanda (SN III 105). According to this instruction, the sense of 'I' arises only when there is grasping, just as it is only by grasping a mirror that one is able to see one's own face.

Ñāṇananda (2004: 217) explains that "when one looks into a mirror ... one suddenly becomes self-conscious ... one gets the notion 'this is me' ... the moment one looks into a mirror one is suddenly reminded of it, as if to exclaim: 'Ah, here I am!'"

What is grasped or clung to, according to this discourse, are none other than the five aggregates of bodily form, feeling, perception, volitional formations and consciousness. This leads me on to another important perspective on *upādāna*, namely its role in relation to the "five aggregates of clinging", or perhaps better the "five aggregates [affected by] clinging".

1.5 The Five Aggregates [Affected by] Clinging

The significance of *upādāna* in relation to the five aggregates is reflected in the standard definition of the first noble truth, according to which the five aggregates [affected by] clinging are the succinct manifestation of the truth of *dukkha*. This is the case to such an extent that one discourse even dispenses with the other specifications usually given, according to which birth, old age, death etc. are *dukkha*. Instead of mentioning these, this discourse simply states that the five aggregates [affected by] clinging are the first noble truth (SN V 425).

The eminent role of grasping in this respect is also reflected in some shortened versions of dependent arising that start off directly with *upādāna*, without mentioning the preceding eight links, and then continue the chain of dependent arising with the remaining links of the series (e.g. MN I 511 or SN III 14).

The *Cūḷavedalla-sutta* clarifies that clinging is not the same as the five aggregates [affected by] clinging, nor is it something apart from them. Rather, clinging stands for desire and lust in regard to them (MN I 300). Another discourse introduces the five aggregates as "things that can be clung to",

again explaining that desire and lust are what is meant by the term ‘clinging’ in this context (SN III 167). This would make it clear that the expression *pañc’upādānakkhandhā* refers to five aggregates as the objects of clinging. In fact, aggregates such as the body would in themselves not be able to cling or grasp, hence my rendering of the expression *pañc’upādānakkhandhā* as "five aggregates [affected by] clinging".

Without such clinging, what is left are the bare five aggregates. The *Khandhā-sutta* in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* explains that the "five aggregates" and the "five aggregates [affected by] clinging" cover the same ground, namely any possible instance of bodily form, feeling, perception, volitional formations and consciousness (SN III 47). What makes the difference between them is the presence or absence of clinging.

From this it would follow that once an arahant has destroyed clinging or grasping, his or her five aggregates can be considered as bare aggregates, because he or she no longer grasps at them.

A problem with this interpretation could seem to be a discourse in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya*, according to which a worldling or any of the four types of noble ones should engage in the same mode of contemplation that reviews the five aggregates [affected by] clinging from a variety of perspectives, such as impermanence, etc. (SN III 167). The instruction given in each instance, even in the case of an arahant, speaks of contemplating the five aggregates [affected by] clinging. This appears to imply that even the aggregates of an arahant are five aggregates [affected by] clinging, not just the five bare aggregates (Bodhi 1976: 94).

Yet, the instruction speaks throughout of "these" five aggregates [affected by] clinging, without providing a direct grammatical relation to the different type of noble ones it mentions.

Hence it would perhaps be more natural to interpret this passage as referring to the five aggregates [affected by] clinging of the monk to whom the discourse is given, who had come for instructions on how to progress on the path. That is, this discourse need not be interpreted as contradicting the assumption that an arahant has only the bare five aggregates, as all clinging and grasping at them has been removed.

1.6 Grasping and *Nibbāna*

Another passage of relevance to the theme of grasping and the status of an arahant can be found in the *Itivuttaka*, which distinguishes between the "element of *Nibbāna* with a residue remaining", *sa-upādisesā nibbānadhātu*, and the "element of *Nibbāna* without residue" (It 38). The "element of *Nibbāna* with a residue remaining" stands for an arahant who is still alive. The "element of *Nibbāna* without residue remaining" refers to the passing away of an arahant. This much can be seen from the verses that accompany this discourse, which qualify the latter as being related to the future, when all forms of existence cease.

To appreciate the implications of the distinction drawn in this discourse, it needs to be born in mind that the term *upādāna* can also have the sense of a "basis", "substrata", "supply" or "fuel". This sense comes to the fore in the context of a fire simile in a discourse in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya*, which indicates that fire burns only as long as it has some fuel for burning, *sa-upādāna*, not without such fuel, *anupādāna* (SN IV 399). The imagery is telling, since it is by 'grasping' its *upādāna*, its fuel, that fire continues to burn.

A similar sense also underlies the expression *sa-upādisesa* in the context of a simile that describes a doctor who treats a

wound caused by a poisoned arrow (MN II 257). Here *sa-upādisesa* refers to a "residue" of poison left in the wound.

Applied to the case of the *Itivuttaka* passage quoted above, the expression *sa-upādisesā nibbānadhātu*, the "element of *Nibbāna* with a residue remaining", thus indicates that the residue of the five aggregates is still in existence. Though this residue is the product of former clinging, it continues in existence even when clinging itself has already been removed. This particular context thus differs from the usage of the qualification *sa-upādisesa* in relation to a non-returner, where it does imply a remainder of clinging (e.g. MN I 63: *sati vā upādisese anāgāmitā*).

1.7 Freedom from Grasping

A prominent method for developing freedom from grasping takes the five aggregates [affected by] clinging as its object. This mode of contemplation focuses on their impermanent nature in particular, that is on their arising and passing away. Practising in this way establishes an increasing inner distance towards one's own tendency to grasp at them (AN III 32).

Contemplating the rise and fall of the five aggregates is given considerable prominence in the discourses as a form of meditation that issues in awakening (Gethin 1992: 56). This may well be the reason why teachings regarding this form of meditation practice are reckoned the Buddha's lion's roar of instruction (SN III 85). The same form of contemplation features among the mindfulness practices described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (MN I 61).

According to the *Aggivacchagotta-sutta*, the Buddha's aloofness from views, *diṭṭhi*, was the direct outcome of his having seen, *diṭṭhaṃ*, the rise and fall of the five aggregates [affected

by] clinging (MN I 486). Even the former Buddha Vipassī reached awakening by contemplating the rise and fall of the five aggregates [affected by] clinging (DN II 35).

The potential of this practice lies in its tendency directly to undermine all clinging to a sense of 'I' (MN III 115). Once the sense of an 'I' that lurks behind the five aggregates [affected by] clinging has been fully understood and abandoned, they stand, as it were, with their root cut off (Thī 106). This root is none other than desire for them (SN III 100).

In contrast, by seeking gratification in things that can be clung to or grasped at, craving will continue to grow. This is simply a natural consequence, just as a fire will burn ever more when additional fuel is added to it, or as a tree will grow as long as it is well nourished through its roots (SN II 85 and SN II 87). In short, one who grasps is thereby bound by Māra (SN III 73).

Due to grasping at a world that is but the product of the six senses, one becomes subject to affliction (Sn 169). Such grasping is the condition for becoming and thus for the perpetuation of *dukkha* (Sn 742). Only those who realize that grasping is fearful will reach liberation through not clinging, (AN I 142), attaining the internal freedom of having destroyed all grasping (SN II 54). To reach the destruction of all clinging requires letting go even of the most sublime type of experience, such as the attainment of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, which can be reckoned supreme among objects of grasping (MN II 265).

Hence practising mindfully one should dwell free from any dependencies and from clinging to anything in the world (MN I 56). In particular at the time of death it is of considerable importance to avoid grasping at any aspect of experience, be this any of the sense-doors or their objects, any element or medita-

tive experience, this world or another (MN III 259). Freedom from clinging is freedom from agitation and will issue in liberation (MN I 67). One who has reached final liberation has thereby fully understood the nature of grasping (SN IV 33). In fact, the total absence of clinging and grasping is the final goal itself.

> "[Having] nothing, clinging [to nothing] ...
> This I call *Nibbāna*." (Sn 1094).

2. Personality View / *Sakkāyadiṭṭhi*

"Personality view" or else "identity view" translate the term *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*, whose components are *sat* "existing", *kāya*, "body" and *diṭṭhi* "view". *Kāya* in the present context has a sense that goes beyond its usual meaning as the physical body, so that the entire term *sakkāya* stands for "embodiment", "identity" or "personality", hence the rendering "personality view" or alternatively "identity view".

According to the *Sakkāya-sutta* (SN III 159), the five aggregates affected by clinging are what make up one's identity or personality. Such identity or personality arises due to craving and will cease if craving is overcome, wherefore the path leading to the cessation of personality is the noble eightfold path. That is, the way leading to the cessation of personality is the way that leads to the cessation of *dukkha* (SN III 44).

Personality view involves a conversion of the instinctive sense of an 'I' at the core of subjective experience into a substantial and possibly even metaphysical entity, an act of 'identification' or 'personification' that engenders the notion of a self, and from this notion then evolves into a full-fledged view.

2.1 Manifestations of Personality View

According to the standard definition in the discourses, the genesis of such a full-fledged personality view operates based on one or the other of twenty possible modes (MN I 300). These twenty modes are arrived at by considering any of the five aggregates in one of the following four manners:

– the aggregates is the self
– the self possesses the aggregate
– the aggregate is part of the self
– the self is within the aggregate.

This twenty-fold matrix sets the paradigm for the arising of any manifestation of personality view.

Instances of these twenty modes of identity view make their appearance in several discourses, which thus illustrate the implications of personality view. The *Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya-sutta* reports a monk assuming that the selfsame consciousness continues through the round of rebirths, this consciousness being what speaks, feels and experiences karmic retribution (MN I 256). In reply to this thorough misunderstanding, according to the discourse the Buddha highlighted the dependent arising of consciousness, thereby indicating that the monk's mistaken view implies a causally independent self. Such notions of causal independence and mastery are the soil in which personality view grows. Yet, neither body nor feelings, perceptions, volitional formations or consciousness are in the final account amenable to full control (MN I 231 and SN III 66), so that to take any of these as an independent self turns out to be just an illusion.

In the *Mahāpuṇṇama-sutta* another monk wonders who will be affected by karmic retribution, given that all five aggregates are not-self (MN III 19). While the above-mentioned monk had fallen into the error of not taking the dependent arising of consciousness into account, the monk in the present case mistakenly believed the denial of a self to imply a denial of karmic retribution and empirical continuity. Both of these mistaken conceptions are simply off-springs of the same personality view and stem from a failure to fully appreciate the implications of dependent arising, which stands for continuity without a continuous essence.

Another discourse depicts Māra challenging the nun Vajirā by asking her who has created the 'being' and where the 'being' had come from (SN I 135). Unlike the two monks mentioned above, the nun Vajirā had developed a deeper understanding of the teachings and was thus quick to point out that Māra was under the sway of views, a reference indicating that his notion of a 'being' was an instance of personality view. Just as a chariot is merely a functional assemblage of parts, she explained, so too the expression 'being' refers merely to the functional assemblage of the five aggregates.

Just as the term 'chariot' is simply a convention, similarly the superimposition of the notion of an 'I' on experience is nothing but a convention. Yet, the above example from the *Mahāpuṇṇama-sutta* shows that disclosing the merely conventional nature of 'I' notions can lead to misunderstandings. In terms of the chariot simile: to reject the existence of an independent and substantial chariot does not render it impossible to ride in the functional assemblage of conditioned and impermanent parts to which the concept 'chariot' refers. In a similar way, to deny the existence of a self does not imply a denial of the existence of the conditioned and impermanent interaction of the five aggregates.

The question posed above by Māra recurs as part of a whole set of confused types of thinking under the influence of personality view, described in the *Sabbāsava-sutta* (MN I 8). According to this discourse, a worldling is prone to wonder: 'Did I exist in the past or not, and if I existed, what was I in the past?' 'Will I exist in the future or will I not exist?' 'Am I at present or am I not?' 'Where did this being come from, where will it go to?' Reflecting unwisely in this way, the *Sabbāsava-sutta* explains, causes the arising of various types of views about a self.

Among these views, one finds not only the view proposed by the monk from the *Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya-sutta*, presuming that the self speaks, feels and experiences karmic retribution, but also the view ‘no self exists for me’, corresponding to the type of thinking that occurred in the monk from the *Mahāpuṇṇama-sutta*. Leaving behind such unwise reflections, the *Sabbāsava-sutta* continues to explain, and wisely attending to the four noble truths one will abandon the fetter of personality view through the attainment of stream-entry.

The twenty possible modes of personality view constitute the basic breeding ground for the arising of all kinds of other views. As a discourse in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* explains (SN IV 287), the different views described in the *Brahmajāla-sutta* are but the outcome of personality view (DN I 12). Were it not for personality view, such views would not arise.

The same point recurs in another discourse, which explains why the Buddha did not make a pronouncement concerning a set of current philosophical propositions about the nature of the world (eternal or not, boundless or not), the relationship of the soul to the body (identity or not) and the destiny of a Tathāgata after death (exists, does not exist, both, neither). According to this discourse, such propositions only arise when one takes the aggregates to be a self in any of the above-mentioned twenty modes (SN IV 395).

Though personality view as the root of all views is certainly incorrect, it is not necessarily a "wrong view" (*micchādiṭṭhi*) in the technical sense of the latter term. Wrong view definitely leads to an evil rebirth, either in the animal realm or in hell (AN I 60). The same cannot be said of personality view.

One who falls prey to personality view, and thereby to the erroneous presumption of a self, might still perform wholesome deeds and believe in karmic retribution. Though the mistaken belief in a self would prevent awakening, it will not prevent a

favourable rebirth. It may well be for this reason that the discourses do not explicitly identify personality view as a wrong view and in one instance even list wrong view side by side with a synonym of personality view (*attānudiṭṭhi*) as different types of views (AN III 447). Thus, personality view is a fetter binding to continuous existence, but not a fetter that inevitably results in future existence in the lower realms.

Personality view as a fetter binding to continuous existence is one of the three fetters that are overcome with stream-entry (AN I 242). Since personality view in its twenty modes boils down to 'I'-dentifying with the five aggregates [affected by] clinging, the cure required to gain freedom from such identification is contemplating these five aggregates as devoid of 'mine', 'I am', and 'my self' (SN III 68). Such contemplation not only covers the last mentioned view 'my self' – personality view proper – but also its foundations: the sense of 'I am' as a manifestation of conceit and the mode of craving underlying the attribution of 'mine' to whatever objects can possibly be appropriated in this way.

Concerning the notion 'mine', the *Mūlapariyāya-sutta* explains that this notion arises out of a basic pattern of conceiving in relation to experienced phenomena (MN I 1). In the case of earth, for example, based on the experience of perceiving earth, the process of conceiving typical for a worldling proceeds like this: the conception 'earth' arises, paving the way to the creation of a subject-object relationship as 'in earth' and 'from earth', which then leads to the notion 'mine' in relation to earth. That is, the sensory input of what is perceived is first accorded real object status and then appropriated. With this act of appropriation, 'self'-ishness comes into being. To appropriate is to control, so that this act of appropriation as 'mine' enhances and confirms the sense of a substantial subject able to exert control.

Due to this inherent notion of a substantial subject able to exert control, the five aggregates [affected by] clinging are experienced as embodiments of the notion 'I am'. From the worldling's point of view, the material body is 'where I am', feelings are 'how I am', perceptions are 'what I am' (perceiving), volitions are 'why I am' (acting), and consciousness is 'whereby I am' (experiencing). In this way, each aggregate offers its own contribution to enacting the reassuring illusion 'I am'. Such 'I am' notions are but erroneous superimpositions on experience, conveying the sense of an autonomous and independent subject that reaches out to acquire or reject discrete substantial objects.

It is this basic fundamental notion of an 'I' which in its rationalised form becomes the full-fledged personality view as 'my self' and therewith forms the basis for all kinds of other views. Already a new born baby has the underlying tendency to personality view, even though while being an infant the child is still without a developed sense of being an individual (MN I 432). This goes to show that the problem posed by personality view is not merely a matter of verbally articulating self notions. In fact, expressions such as 'I' and 'mine' are still used by an arahant, for conventional purposes (SN I 14).

Hence to go beyond personality view is not a matter of rhetoric. Instead, it requires overcoming and eradicating the craving, conceit and view forming process that in the case of the ordinary worldling accompany the use of such expressions as 'I' and 'mine'.

2.2 Removal of Personality View

With the attainment of stream-entry, the fetter of personality view is forever eradicated. The notion 'I am' as an expression of conceit still lingers on and will only be abandoned with full

awakening (SN III 130). For this same reason, the *Mūlapariyāya-sutta* advises that the disciple in higher training (*sekha*) should avoid taking experienced phenomena as 'mine' (MN I 4). A rationale for this injunction comes to the fore in another discourse, according to which the Buddha – somewhat tongue in cheek – invites his disciples to cling to a self doctrine, if they should be able to find a self doctrine that does not result in the arising of *dukkha* (MN I 137).

The dire consequences of self notions are not easily seen and the many folk delight in identity and thus remain in the bondage of Māra (It 92). Fettered, obsessed and enslaved by personality view, worldlings are unaware of the possibility to escape from it (MN I 433). "See this world with its gods", a verse in the *Sutta-nipāta* proclaims, "conceiving what is not self to be a self" (Sn 756). As this verse indicates, men as well as gods are under the sway of personality view. Among gods endowed with a long life span the mistaken belief in a permanent self can arise easily. On hearing the Buddha proclaim the impermanent nature of identity, these gods are then struck with fear, realizing that they too are caught up in the predicament of personality (AN II 33).

A monastic disciple who does not feel inspired to give up personality is like a man who attempts to swim across the river Ganges, but out of weakness is unable to safely cross over (MN I 435). Lack of inspiration for the relinquishment of identity may sometimes be due to attachment to deeper stages of concentration (AN II 165). More mundane reasons for delighting in personality can be taking pleasure in activity, in chattering, in sleeping, in socializing and in conceptual proliferation (AN III 292).

Once the mind has gained the inspiration to relinquish personality, however, one has gone beyond the underlying tendency to delight in it (AN III 246). In fact, from the viewpoint

of noble ones the very giving up of personality is happiness indeed. What the many folk take to be happiness, noble ones see as misery, but what the many folk call misery, the noble ones know to be happiness (SN IV 127).

Once *Nibbāna* is experienced, the much cherished 'I' is seen for what it is: an act of cheating and deluding oneself (MN I 511). Such cheating and deluding oneself through clinging to identity is like being on the near shore of a water expanse (SN IV 175), a shore beset by danger and fearful, while the other shore, safe and free from danger, is *Nibbāna*, the cessation of identity.

3. Right View / *Sammādiṭṭhi*

Right view is the first factor of the noble eightfold path and a quality of fundamental importance in early Buddhism. Just as the dawn is the forerunner of the sun, similarly right view is the forerunner of all wholesome things (AN V 236).

To understand the range of right view requires some understanding of its direct opposite: wrong view (*micchādiṭṭhi*). The opposition between these two lies in the fact that while right view heads the path leading to deliverance, wrong view heads the path that leads ever deeper into *dukkha*. Hence in what follows, I will first of all examine wrong view, before turning to various aspects related to right view.

3.1 Wrong View

Wrong view is one of the ten unwholesome courses of action (*akusala kammapatha*), singled out as those actions that have a particular propensity of leading to an evil rebirth. No other thing is as conducive to a lower rebirth as wrong view (AN I 31), with its potential of resulting in being born in the animal realm or in hell (AN I 60). Just as all growth originating from a bitter seed will be of a bitter nature, so whatever deeds, words, thoughts, intentions and aspirations that originate from wrong view will all conduce to ill and suffering (AN I 32).

It almost seems as if wrong view were a necessary requirement for being reborn in hell. In fact, unless beings were blindfolded by a false perspective, by the fond hope that somehow or other they will be able to get away with evil acts or behav-

iour, they would quite probably not undertake the type of evil deeds that will ripen in rebirth in the nether worlds.

The discourses describe various manifestations of wrong view. Some instances of wrong view are related to karmic retribution, when wrong view consists in presuming that by behaving like a dog or a cow (MN I 387), by being an actor and entertaining people (SN IV 307), by performing one's duty in warfare as a mercenary (SN IV 309) or as a cavalry warrior (SN IV 311), one will be reborn in heaven. Such wrong views involve a misconception of karma and its fruit, mistakenly believing that a type of behaviour which has the propensity of leading to a lower rebirth will meet with a heavenly reward.

Other manifestations of wrong view are examined in the *Apaṇṇaka-sutta*, such as: 'there is no other world', 'there is no action' and 'there is no cause' (MN I 402-8). Such wrong views not only misconceive, but even flatly deny the existence of karmic retribution and causality, and consequently also discount the existence of other realms of existence.

The *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* records that several religious teachers living at the time of the Buddha propounded such wrong views. According to its report, one of them held the view that action has no ethical quality, in the sense that there is no real difference between killing and helping others, between destroying and offering gifts (DN I 52). According to the same discourse, other contemporary teachers denied causality or else taught a theory according to which cutting off someone's head should not be considered 'killing', but should be reckoned only as an inserting of a blade in the space between different material principles.

Another teacher described in the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* proposed that there is no karmic retribution for good and evil deeds, no world beyond, no responsibility towards one's par-

ents, no spontaneously arisen beings and no spiritually realized practitioners (DN I 55). His philosophical position is shown to be based on a materialistic conception, which attempts to reduce experience to an interaction of the four elements and takes bodily death to be complete annihilation.

This type of view is not altogether uncommon in modern days, yet it seems to constitute wrong view par excellence. This can be deduced from the circumstance that the *Mahācattārīsaka-sutta* not only uses the same formulation for its definition of wrong view, but also defines right view in exactly the opposite terms. Thus right view proposes that there definitely is karmic retribution for good and evil deeds, there is a world beyond, one has responsibility towards one's parents, there are spontaneously arisen beings and there are those who have gained spiritual realization (MN III 72).

3.2 Right View and Investigation

When examining this type of right view, described in the *Mahācattārīsaka-sutta*, it becomes evident that not all propositions made here are empirically verifiable by an average person. Direct knowledge of the existence of spontaneously arisen beings, for example, would require the development of special abilities, which according to early Buddhism can be gained through mastering deeper levels of concentration.

Nevertheless, the main propositions entailed by such right view need not be accepted on mere faith alone. The *Apaṇṇaka-sutta* describes a kind of wager argument in favour of propositions that are beyond one's present powers of verification (MN I 402). Even though one may lack certainty about retribution for one's deeds in a future life, just accepting the possibility of such retribution in principle will lead one to act in wholesome ways. Acting in wholesome ways one will encounter respect,

friendship and praise in the present world, positive results that are more immediately verifiable than future heavenly rewards.

The Discourse to the *Kālāma*s makes a somewhat similar point, contending that the beneficial results of implementing the basic premises of wholesome ethical conduct are verifiable within one's personal experience (AN I 189). Hence, these principles can be accepted without needing to rely merely on faith, oral tradition or any other type of external authority.

That right view is not a matter of faith in an external authority alone can also be inferred from the two factors that lead to the arising of right view and wrong view: Right view arises in dependence on the voice of another and wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*), wrong view arises in dependence on the voice of another and unwise attention (AN I 87).

The first factor mentioned in this stipulation gives proper place to the influence exercised by others, a circumstance reflected also in the statement that to establish others in right view is for the welfare and benefit of many, just as to establish others in wrong view is to their detriment and disadvantage (AN I 33). The difference between the arising of right or wrong view, however, is not only a question of the content of what another may communicate. Of crucial importance is the second factor mentioned above, the presence of wise or unwise attention. In fact, this second factor seems to be the more important of the two, since another passage proclaims that no other condition is of such importance for the arising and development of right view as wise attention, just as unwise attention stands out as the decisive factor for the arising and development of wrong view (AN I 31).

Wise attention means to give attention "thoroughly" or "down to its origin" (*yoniso*). That is, right view is a matter of thorough examination. The recommendations given in the

Apaṇṇaka-sutta and in the Discourse to the *Kālāma*s would be practical implementations of this second quality, that is, the development of wise attention. All this goes to show that the conception of right view in early Buddhism is not a matter of mere blind acceptance of a set of propositions, but by its very nature requires an intelligent and scrutinizing investigation that is to be undertaken by the person about to take up such view.

Along the same lines, the *Cūḷavedalla-sutta* places right view among the aggregate of wisdom (MN I 301). This is remarkable, since in this way the sequence of the noble eightfold path has wisdom first, followed by morality and concentration. In other contexts, such as descriptions of the gradual path, one regularly finds the sequence morality, concentration, wisdom instead. The noble eightfold path's departure from the more common sequence highlights the function of right view in providing the all important directional input for the practice of the path. Without the guiding principle provided by right view and expressed by right intention, the training in the path will not be able to issue in deliverance.

3.3 Right View as the Forerunner of the Path

A highlight on the fundamental role of right view is provided in the *Mahācattārīsaka-sutta*, which emphatically proclaims that right view is the forerunner of the noble eightfold path (MN III 71). In regard to each factor of the path discussed in this discourse, the task of right view is invariably to distinguish between their right and wrong manifestations.

Such right view as the ability to differentiate between right and wrong manifestations of the path factors needs to be supported by the monitoring function of right mindfulness and by the right effort of overcoming what is wrong and implementing what is right. The cooperation of these three, headed by right view, will put the other path factors into action.

In relation to the first path factor itself, the *Mahācattārīsaka-sutta* comes out with the statement that to understand right view as right view is right view. Though this might at first sound tautological, if the function of right view as the guiding principle for the entire path is appreciated, the statement made in the *Mahācattārīsaka-sutta* will become intelligible. By providing this guiding principle of clearly distinguishing between what leads ahead on the path and what runs counter to it, right view becomes the forerunner for each of the path factor discussed in the *Mahācattārīsaka-sutta*, including itself. That is, right view is 'right' in as much as it 'rightly' leads onward on the path to liberation. This takes place because the 'view' of right view focuses on progress on the path, it 'views' liberation as the foremost priority for oneself, as well as for others.

The clear orientation that results from such implementation of right view will provide a strong liberating directive to one's whole life. Just as all the water in the ocean has the same taste of salt (AN IV 203, Ud 56, Vin II 239), so right view developed in this manner will pervade all one's deeds, thoughts and experiences with the taste of liberation.

The *Sammādiṭṭhi-sutta*, the "Discourse on Right View", highlights that recognition of what is wholesome and what is unwholesome is a manifestation of right view (MN I 47). In the *Dvedhavitakka-sutta* the same basic distinction takes the form of dividing thoughts into wholesome and unwholesome types (MN I 114). The discourse indicates that this division of thoughts was part of the Buddha's pre-awakening cultivation of the mind and paved the way for his attainment of full liberation. Taken together, these passages illustrate how right view – as the recognition of what is unwholesome and thereby productive of *dukkha*, in contrast to what is wholesome and therefore conducive to freedom from *dukkha* – constitutes indeed the very foundation of the path.

Right view is not only a precondition for being able to embark on the practice of the path. The same path-factor remains of continuous relevance throughout. The progressive evolution of right view proceeds via the stage of becoming fully established with stream-entry until the highest consummation of the path, when it becomes the right view of one beyond training (AN V 222). That is, right view remains the forerunner of the path even in the case of an arahant, and there is no point at which right view is to be left behind. In this way, right view continues to be of relevance throughout, showing how this fundamentally important path factor is dynamic, something that evolves concomitant with the development of the path it heads.

The progress from right view as the initial guiding principle of the path to right view as the insight gained through the development of the path comes to light in the *Mahācattārīsaka-sutta*, which distinguishes right view into two kinds: right view affected by attachment and right view free from it (MN III 72). Right view still affected by attachment refers to the earlier mentioned set of propositions about the nature of reality in terms of its causal functioning and of the existence of certain phenomena in it such as spontaneously arisen beings and spiritually accomplished practitioners. The other type of right view, mentioned in the *Mahācattārīsaka-sutta*, is the presence of wisdom during awakening itself.

3.4 Arrival at Right View

With the first level of awakening attained, the stream-enterer has 'seen' the *Dhamma* (MN I 380) and is henceforth endowed with 'view' (MN III 64), an expression indicating that from now on right view has become firmly established and unshakeable.

The *Sammādiṭṭhi-sutta* (MN I 46) describes various ways of arriving at such right view, most of which are based on insight

into one of the links of dependent arising. In regard to each of these links, the requirement for gaining right view is insight into the item in question, into its arising, into its cessation, and into the way leading to its cessation. In this way, the *Sammādiṭṭhi-sutta* applies the basic scheme of the four noble truths to each of the links of dependent arising.

The topic of dependent arising comes up again in an explanation of right view in the *Kaccānagotta-sutta* (SN II 17). Here right view is shown to be the middle path of dependent arising, which avoids the extremes 'all is' and 'all is not'.

Other discourses indicate that to see the impermanent nature of the five aggregates (SN III 51), or of the six senses and their objects (SN IV 142) constitutes right view. According to these discourses, by 'rightly viewing' the aggregates or senses as impermanent one becomes disenchanted, desires fade away, and eventually liberation will be gained. A similar perspective on right view can be found in the *Mahāsaḷāyatanika-sutta*, which reckons the abandoning of craving and delight in regard to the six sense-spheres, and in regard to the feelings that arise in dependence on them, as constituting right view (MN III 289).

3.5 Right View and the Four Noble Truths

Whether it is insight into the dependent arising of *dukkha* or into the impermanent and thereby unsatisfactory nature of the five aggregates or the six senses spheres, what right view in these various descriptions amounts to is insight into the four noble truths. Just as the footprints of all animals fit into the footprint of an elephant, similarly the teachings of the Buddha are all contained in the four noble truths (MN I 184). Hence it comes as no surprise when the most frequent formulation of right view found in the discourses speaks simply of insight into the four noble truths: "knowledge of *dukkha*, its arising, its

cessation and the path leading to its cessation – this is right view" (e.g. SN V 8).

Right view in terms of the four noble truths parallels a four-fold method of diagnosis and prescription used in ancient Indian medicine, which proceeds from recognition of a disease (*dukkha*) and the virus responsible for it (*taṇhā*) to the possibility of complete health (*Nibbāna*) and the practical cure (*magga*) to be undertaken to that end (T II 105a25 and T II 462c10). This parallelism underlines the pragmatic orientation of right view.

In fact, the four noble truths are not just four propositions to be accepted, but rather constitute a four-facetted approach to the gaining of truth. Each of these four facets requires a particular activity: the first truth needs to be "understood", the second needs to be "abandoned", the third needs to be "realized" and the fourth needs to be "developed" (SN V 436). The range of activities described here corroborates that right view is a matter of practice and realization.

Now what does right view by way of the four noble truths amount to? In practical terms, it amounts to identifying any form of attachment as a cause for the arising of *dukkha*. Now to be able to identify attachment as and when it manifests requires monitoring one's mental condition as continuously as possible. The guiding principle for such monitoring is the simple question: 'does this lead to *dukkha*?', or: 'does this lead to freedom from *dukkha*?' – a query to be posed in relation to oneself as well as to others.

Regular mental repetition or reminding oneself of this simple maxim will slowly build up an inner awareness of its main thrust, a basic 'feel' for its directional input that becomes ingrained and pre-conceptual. Put into practice in this way, the perspective underlying this maxim will eventually resurge dur-

ing any activity on its own in order to provide the necessary orientation.

Right view in terms of the ability to identify attachment as being responsible for the arising of *dukkha* also underlies the treatment of views found in the *Aṭṭhakavagga* of the *Sutta-nipāta*, where numerous verses speak in favour of going beyond views. That is, to leave behind all views in the sense of letting go of dogmatic adherence and attachment is none other than the practical implementation of insight into the four noble truths. This, however, does not imply that such insight also needs to be discarded. Far from it, since this same insight as the right view forerunner of the entire path continues up to and beyond the stage of full awakening.

That right view continues even when 'views' are left behind can be inferred from a verse in the same *Sutta-nipāta*, which recommends "not going into views", yet "being endowed with vision" (Sn 152). Similarly, the *Aggivacchagotta-sutta* points out that the Buddha had put away "views" (*diṭṭhi*), having "seen" (*diṭṭhaṃ*) the impermanent nature of the five aggregates (MN I 486). The word play in these passages on various derivatives of the same Pāli term clearly indicates that though views are left behind, vision still continues, corresponding to the faculty of insight represented by right view. In short: right view as the vision gained through deep insight is what 'sees through' any view.

In this way, the scheme of the four noble truths – corresponding to the standard definition of right view – can be applied to views itself: insight into views, their arising, their cessation and the path leading to their cessation. Such insight will lead to freedom from *dukkha* (AN IV 68). This is precisely what makes the four noble truths become right view, namely that they lead to disenchantment, peace, direct knowledge and *Nibbāna* (MN I 431).

For right view to issue in full awakening requires its development in dependence on seclusion, dispassion and cessation, thereby culminating in letting go (SN IV 367). A similar nuance underlies also a stipulation found in the *Kosambiya-sutta*, according to which the development of right view should result in internal tranquillity and stillness (MN I 323). Quite in keeping with these indications on the appropriate affective attitude towards views, the *Madhupiṇḍika-sutta* reports how the Buddha, on being challenged to proclaim his view, calmly answered that his view was such as to lead to the absence of quarrelling with anyone (MN I 108).

These passages show that the early Buddhist conception of right view is not only a question of content but also of attitude. Only right view free from attachment and clinging can unfold its full potential for progress on the path.

Undertaken in this way, right view becomes the escape from all views, and thus is of great fruit, proper, wholesome, blameless, productive of happiness, and the bright way; wherefore it is to be followed, developed, made much of and realized (AN V 238-247). In short: just as the river Ganges inclines towards and leads to the sea, so right view inclines towards and leads to *Nibbāna* (SN IV 180).



4. Volitional Formations / *Saṅkhārā*

The term *saṅkhāra* combines *kāra*, "making", with the prefix *saṃ-*, "together", and thus has the literal sense of "making together ". An example for such making together can be found in an allowance in the *Vinaya* for "making together" (*abhisaṅkharituṃ*) a medicinal ointment, in the sense of preparing it (Vin I 205). Another relevant passage can be found in a verse in the *Sutta-nipāta*, where the etymologically closely related *saṅkhata* qualifies a raft as being well "made together" (Sn 21), conveying the sense that this raft is well constructed.

In the discourses, the term *saṅkhāra* can have an active and a passive sense, representing both that which makes together and that which is made together. The more active nuance of a 'making together' in the sense of the exercise of volition or will-power is more prominent in the term *abhisaṅkhāra*, which could be rendered as "volitional determination", while the passive nuance of something being 'made together' in the sense of being a product of conditions underlies the related term *saṅkhata*, which qualifies something as being "conditioned".

The term *saṅkhāra* itself comprises all these nuances, a fact which makes it impossible to capture the whole range of meaning of this term with a single English expression. Various translations have been proposed, such as "activity", "coefficient", "composition", "compound", "concoction", "concomitant", "confection", "constituent", "construction", "determinant", "disposition", "fabrication", "formation", "force", "preparation", "process", "synergy", and "volition". Each of these captures one or several aspects of the term, yet none is able to

fully account for the entire range of meanings underlying the term *saṅkhāra*.

To get a clearer picture of this range of meanings, three main contexts in which the term *saṅkhāra* occurs can be distinguished: (1) as the fourth of the five aggregates; (2) as the second link in the twelve-fold formula of dependent arising, and (3) as anything conditioned, the most general sense of the term, exemplified by its usage in the dictum that all *saṅkhāra*s are impermanent (Dhp 277).

4.1 *Saṅkhāra*s as an Aggregate

The *saṅkhāra*s constitute the fourth of the five aggregates [affected by] clinging and in this context represent the conative aspect of mental experience. The aggregate of *saṅkhāra*s depends on contact, being in this respect similar to the aggregates of feeling and perception (MN III 17). This in itself simple statement of conditionality is quite significant in the case of *saṅkhāra*s, as it highlights their dependent nature. What subjectively may give the impression of being an independent core within experience that has intentions and takes decisions, on closer inspection turns out to be just a process of reactions to the input provided by contact. Developing insight in this way reveals the not-self nature of *saṅkhāra*s.

While the aggregates of feeling and consciousness relate to the sense-doors, the aggregates of perception and *saṅkhāra*s relate to the sense-objects, i.e. to forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and mental objects (SN III 60). This suggests that whereas feeling and consciousness pertain to some degree more to the receptive side of mental experience, perception and *saṅkhāra*s are more actively involved with the object by recognizing it and reacting to it. The sense of reaction is also reflected in the standard definition in the discourses (e.g. SN III

63), according to which the aggregate of *saṅkhāra*s comprises volitions (*cetanā*) arising in relation to the six types of sense-objects. In short, as an aggregate the *saṅkhāra*s are what reacts to experience.

An example illustrating the sense of volitional activity of the term *saṅkhāra* occurs in a passage that describes how the lay-follower Soṇa had the volition to go forth (Ud 57: *pabbajābhi-saṅkhāra*). On being told by the monk Mahākaccāna of the difficulties of the monk's life, the force of this *saṅkhāra* diminished and he decided to remain a layman. A similar instance can be found in a description of how the general Sīha had the intention of visiting the Buddha (AN IV 180: *gamiyābhisaṅkhāra*). On being told by others that the Buddha was a teacher of non-action, his volition similarly lost force and he decided not to go. In both these instances, however, on a subsequent occasion the volitional force of their respective *saṅkhāra*s became strong enough to override all obstacles, so that finally Soṇa did go forth and Sīha did go to see the Buddha.

Another example illustrating the volitional force of the term *saṅkhāra* can be found in the context of the four roads to supernormal power (*iddhipāda*), which combine different forms of concentration with volitional striving (*padhānasaṅkhāra*). Such volitional striving refers in this context in particular to overcoming what is unwholesome and to establishing what is wholesome (SN V 268).

Volitional striving (*saṅkhārappadhāna*) recurs again elsewhere as a tool for overcoming *dukkha* (MN II 223). The development of volitional striving by way of the four roads to supernormal power can even yield the ability of performing supernormal feats. Here again the *saṅkhāra*s occur, since it is the *iddhābhisaṅkhāra*, literally the "supernormal determination", that is required for performing a magical feat, such as when Mahāmoggallāna shook a heavenly palace with his toe

(MN I 253), or when another monk created rain and fire (SN IV 292).

The *Sampasādanīya-sutta* reports that someone with telepathic powers is able to recognize the operation of the *saṅkhāra*s in another's mind (DN III 104). According to this passage, once the volitional direction of such a *saṅkhāra* has been recognised through telepathic powers, it will be possible to predict the type of thought that is about to arise in the other person's mind. This indicates that the *saṅkhāra*s as volitional formations can represent the beginning stages of mental activity, the first inclination or tendency that precedes the arising of fully formulated thought, whose nature is determined by the directional input provided by the respective *saṅkhāra*s.

Although the ability to recognize the operation of such *saṅkhāra*s in another's mind requires telepathic powers, the same is not required for recognizing their operation in one's own mind. In fact, it is precisely with such recognition within the sphere of one's own mind that an intriguing potential for the development of insight arises. Sustained practice of mindfulness is able to unveil the stage when the first inclination or tendency that precedes actual thought arises in the mind. By becoming conscious of reactions at the time of their initial onset, it becomes possible to nip them in the bud in case such reactions should be of an unwholesome nature.

For the development of this ability, contemplation of feelings can offer a rather substantial contribution, since it is through awareness of the affective tone of experience that the beginning reaction can be discerned before it has become fully formulated in thought. Becoming aware of *saṅkhāra*s from the perspective of contemplation of feelings can offer a crucial temporal advantage in this way, since the onset of reaction is quite literally 'felt' at its very inception. Moreover, awareness of the affective undercurrent of thoughts is less prone to dis-

traction by becoming engaged with their content, wherefore such awareness more easily reveals their true nature.

The aggregate of *saṅkhāra*s interacts with each of the other aggregates and has a conditioning effect upon them (SN III 87). It comprises not only volitional reactions in the present moment, but also past and future volitional formations, internally or externally arisen ones, be they gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near (MN III 17). As an aggregate, the *saṅkhāra*s share with the other aggregates the qualities of all conditioned phenomena. Thus all volitions and intentions, representative of the 'will', are impermanent, unsatisfactory and without a self. Though pleasure and satisfaction can be experienced in relation to the aggregate of *saṅkhāra*s – in particular on those occasions where we seem to be able to freely exercise our will – such pleasure and satisfaction are outweighed by the disadvantage of their impermanent and therefore ultimately unsatisfactory nature (SN III 103).

During later developments of Buddhist philosophy, the meaning of the term *saṅkhāra* expanded until it came to include a wide range of mental factors, becoming an umbrella term for assembling such mental factors as, for example, contact, mental application, the five faculties and powers, factors of the noble eightfold path and the absence of hatred and covetousness (Dhs 17). In this way, the *saṅkhāra*s came to stand for anything mental apart from feeling, perception and consciousness. The circumstance that the *saṅkhāra*s as an aggregate usually occur in the plural form and their inherent sense of referring not only to what 'makes together' but also to what 'is made together' may have influenced the choice of the term *saṅkhāra* as a heading for these mental factors and qualities.

Nevertheless, it needs to be kept in mind that this expansion in meaning goes beyond the implications of the aggregate of *saṅkhāra*s in the early discourses, where it represents mainly

the volitional aspect of mental experience. From a practical perspective, it is this nuance of intention and will that is of central importance.

4.2 *Saṅkhāras* as a Link in Dependent Arising

In the context of dependent arising, the *saṅkhāra*s also act as volitional formations, yet their role is different due to the basic difference between the two schemes of the aggregates and of dependent arising. The five aggregates are an analysis of the constituents of empirical existence at a particular moment of time. In dependent arising, however, the emphasis is on the conditioned arising of *dukkha*. The difference between these two schemes is somewhat similar to the difference between taking a horizontal and a vertical cut through a particular object. Both are cuts, yet the respective perspective is different.

To illustrate this difference, the case of an arahant can be taken into consideration. An arahant is still endowed with the aggregate of *saṅkhāra*s. However, none of these *saṅkhāra*s is rooted in ignorance, so that none of these *saṅkhāra*s will take part in the dependent arising of *dukkha*. This goes to show that the compass of the *saṅkhāra*s as an aggregate is broader than that of the *saṅkhāra*s as a link in dependent arising.

As the second of the twelve-link formula of dependent arising (*paṭicca samuppāda*), the *saṅkhāra*s lead from the first link of ignorance to the third link of consciousness. According to the traditional interpretation, in this context *saṅkhāra*s represent the karmically active volitional formations responsible for rebirth and continued existence. That is, in the context of dependent arising the *saṅkhāra*s are the creative principle of various forms of existence. This creative potential of the *saṅkhāra*s is reflected in a passage in the *Saṅgīti-sutta* (DN III 211),

according to which all beings exist in dependence on *saṅkhāras*.

The *Papāta-sutta* takes up the conditional relationship between the first link of ignorance (in terms of not understanding the four noble truths) and *saṅkhāras*. According to its exposition, those who do not understand the four noble truths will delight in *saṅkhāras* leading to birth, old age and death, to sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair (SN V 449). In contrast, one who understands the four noble truths will not delight in *saṅkhāras* and thus be able to gain freedom from birth, old age and death etc.

A related perspective is provided in the *Dvayatānupassanā-sutta*. The discourse declares that all *dukkha* depends on *saṅkhāras*, whereas with the cessation of *saṅkhāras* no more *dukkha* will arise (Sn 731). This highlights the role of *saṅkhāras* as a decisive link in the dependent arising of birth, old age and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair, mentioned above. Once this role is clearly understood and the calming of all *saṅkhāras* has been reached, the *Dvayatānupassanā-sutta* continues, one will no longer be subject to future existence (Sn 733).

The *Saṅkhāruppatti-sutta* documents the function of *saṅkhāras* in relation to rebirth (MN III 99). The discourse describes how someone endowed with confidence, morality, learning, generosity and wisdom may have the aspiration to be reborn in a favourable situation as a human or in a heavenly realm. If this mental aspiration is developed and repeatedly cultivated, the person in question will indeed be reborn in that situation or realm. That is, repeatedly developing this type of *saṅkhāras* is what leads to the particular type of rebirth. The *Saṅgīti-sutta* indicates that an aspiration for a favourable rebirth can also become effective if it is based on the meritorious deed of giving to recluses and Brahmins (DN III 258).

The importance of one's mental inclinations is again highlighted in the *Kukkuravatika-sutta* (MN I 387), which reports a discussion between the Buddha and ascetics who had undertaken the practice of behaving like a dog or like a cow. The discourse indicates that the mental inclination resulting from such a way of behaviour will just lead to rebirth as a dog or a cow. The principle behind this is that *saṅkhāra*s of a particular type will lead to a corresponding type of rebirth. Hence, someone whose *saṅkhāra*s are similar to those of an animal will simply be reborn as an animal. In this way, *saṅkhāra*s are indeed the creative principle responsible for various forms of existence.

In more general terms, if *saṅkhāra*s are of a harmful nature, they will in turn lead to a rebirth where harmful types of experiences are predominant. That is, each living being creates and forms its own character and existence, both in past lives and at every moment of present existence, through the medium of *saṅkhāra*s.

The significance of *saṅkhāra*s in the context of dependent arising is, however, not confined to rebirth. From the perspective of the development of insight, the second link of *saṅkhāra*s can be seen to represent the operation of one's mental 'conditioning' in the present, in as much as it is rooted in ignorance.

The discourses analyse such mental conditioning from several related angles. One of these perspectives speaks of "influxes" or "taints", *āsava*s, whose fermenting and festering 'influence' keeps on spoiling the mind by 'tainting' it with ignorance and other defilements. Another perspective on the operational mechanism of one's mental conditioning comes to light with the "underlying tendencies", *anusaya,* which in a barely noticeable way 'tend' towards ignorance and assorted evils in the form of 'proclivities' and 'inclinations' of the mind. Yet

another perspective on the predicament that results from the conditionings of one's mind is thrown into relief with the "fetters", *saṃyojana*, which depict the lack of freedom of the mind that results from the 'bondage' of ignorance and other detrimental states.

All of these taken together could be subsumed under the term *saṅkhāra* in the sense of one's mental conditioning as a result of ignorance. This sense of *saṅkhāra* acquires particular significance in relation to another link, where the chain of the dependent arising of *dukkha* needs to be broken: the arising of craving in dependence on feeling. The habitual reaction to feeling by way of craving is the outcome of one's mental conditioning, which in turn is the final result of past volitional reactions under the influence of ignorance. Hence at the converging point of feeling these conditionings, these *saṅkhāra*s, manifest their influence. Through determined and continuous practice these conditionings can be gradually rendered inoperative and eradicated.

The insight perspective that unfolds in this way is complementary to the above-described contemplation of *saṅkhāra*s as volitional reactions that manifest in the present moment. Both are two facets of the same coin: a gradual de-conditioning of the mind.

As the second link of dependent arising, *saṅkhāra*s fall into three main types: bodily, verbal and mental (SN II 4). Thus based on ignorance, one may generate a bodily, verbal or mental *saṅkhāra* either on one's own initiative or else when prompted by others, either deliberately (*sampajāna*) or else without deliberation (*asampajāna*) (SN II 40). The distinctions introduced in this discourse reveal that the generation of *saṅkhāra*s is not necessarily a matter of one's own free decision. Thus one may be prompted by others to generate certain *saṅkhāra*s, or at times one may even react without any delibera-

tion. This makes continuous presence of mindfulness at the level of generating *saṅkhāra*s all the more a crucial requirement.

The *Parivimaṃsana-sutta* introduces another threefold distinction of *saṅkhāra*s. The discourse explains how due to ignorance a worldling generates *saṅkhāras* that are meritorious (*puñña*), non-meritorious (*apuñña*) or imperturbable (*āneñja*), which in turn lead to the arising of types of consciousness of the same nature (SN II 82). Once ignorance has been eradicated, however, these three types of *saṅkhāra*s are also abandoned.

4.3 *Saṅkhāra*s in General

The threefold distinction of *saṅkhāra*s into bodily, verbal and mental occurs not only in the context of dependent arising, but also in relation to the cessation of perception and feeling (*saññāvedayitanirodha*). The sequence in which these three *saṅkhāra*s cease on attaining cessation is explained in detail in the *Cūḷavedalla-sutta* (MN I 301). On entering the attainment of cessation at first the verbal *saṅkhāra*s cease, which in this context stand for initial and sustained mental application. This is followed by the cessation of the bodily *saṅkhāra*s, which here stand for the breath; after which the mental *saṅkhāras* cease, which in the present context comprise perception and feeling.

The explanation given in this discourse shows that these three types of *saṅkhāra*s are different from the threefold distinction into bodily, verbal and mental *saṅkhāra*s applicable to the context of dependent arising. The difference is that the three types of *saṅkhāra*s as the second link in the scheme of dependent arising depend on ignorance. The same cannot be said in the present context, since breathing, mental application, and perception or feeling will still be present in the case of an

arahant, in whom ignorance has been eradicated and who therefore has gone beyond the three types of *saṅkhāra*s that lead to the dependent arising of *dukkha*.

The term *saṅkhāra* occurs also in relation to another type of cessation, namely the "gradual cessation of *saṅkhāra*s" that takes place when attaining the four absorptions, the immaterial attainments and the above mentioned cessation of perception and feeling (SN IV 217). The *saṅkhāra*s whose cessation this passage describes are speech, initial and sustained mental application, joy, breathing, perception of form, perception of infinite space, perception of infinite consciousness, perception of nothingness and finally all perceptions and feelings. The point of this presentation is to show the determining factors of each of these attainments, presented in terms of what has been left when progressing from one of them to what constitutes the next higher experience. Thus with the attainment of the first absorption speech has ceased, with the fourth absorption breathing has come to an end and with the attainment of cessation any perception or feeling have disappeared.

Another usage of the term *saṅkhāra* represents the life-force or the will to live. An example of this usage can be found in a description of how the Buddha overcame a disease with the help of his will to live, his *jīvitasaṅkhāra* (SN V 152). On a later occasion he gave up that same will to live, referred to alternatively as his *āyusaṅkhāra* or his *bhavasaṅkhāra* (SN V 262).

Regarding such *āyusaṅkhāra*s, their presence apparently continues even during the cessation of perception and feeling (MN I 296). Another discourse points out that the speed with which *āyusaṅkhāra*s come to an end is faster than the motion of the sun and the moon (SN II 266). In this particular passage, the *āyusaṅkhāra*s represent life as such, not only the will to live.

The term *bhavasaṅkhāra* recurs in another instance (AN V 88), which explains that the *bhavasaṅkhāra* leading to renewed existence is one of the factors bound to bodily existence (*sarīraṭṭha*). This instance relates the *bhavasaṅkhāra* to the context of rebirth in particular and therewith to its determining role for the continuity of existence. It is significant that in this passage the *bhavasaṅkhāra* occurs together with other terms that are related to the body, such as heat and cold, hunger and thirst, defecation and urination, and restraint of body, speech and livelihood. This gives the term *bhavasaṅkhāra* a strong nuance of being somehow rooted in or closely related to the body.

Another context within which the term *saṅkhāra* makes its appearance is in relation to five different types of non-returners (e.g. SN V 201). Two of these non-returners can be distinguished according to whether they attain final *Nibbāna* "with exertion" (*sasaṅkhāra*) or "without exertion". A discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* relates attaining final *Nibbāna* "with exertion" to undertaking contemplation of the unattractive nature of the body or of the repulsive nature of food, etc.; while to do the same "without exertion" takes place with the help of developing the absorptions (AN II 155).

At times, the term *saṅkhāra* can cover all five aggregates. Such a usage occurs in a verse by the monk Adhimutta, in which he tells a gang of criminals intending to murder him that he is free from fear, since he knows that there is no 'I' to be killed – only *saṅkhāras* will pass away (Th 715). A similar sense recurs in a verse by the nun Vajirā (SN I 135), who in reply to a challenge by Māra points out that his notion of a (substantial) 'being' is utterly mistaken, since in reality there is just a heap of *saṅkhāra*s.

*Saṅkhāra*s can also stand for the whole of perceptual experience. Thus the *Pañcattaya-sutta* (MN II 231) explains that for

attaining neither-perception-nor-non-perception the presence of anything seen, heard, sensed or cognised becomes an obstruction. This passage uses the term *saṅkhāra* to represent what is seen, heard, sensed or cognised, followed by explaining that this lofty attainment can only be gained with a mere residue of *saṅkhāra*s.

Another relevant instance occurs in a verse in the *Therīgāthā*, where a girl about to be married to a prince decides to rather go forth (Thī 514). When explaining her decision, she points out that she does not delight in what belongs to *saṅkhāra*s. In this instance, the term *saṅkhāra* appears to represent all the sensual delight and wealth that awaits her on being married.

In the more general usage of the term *saṅkhāra*, the active as well as the passive sense underlying the term can express itself. An example for the active sense occurs in a passage which explains that evil unwholesome things arise due to a cause (*sasaṅkhārā*), not without a cause (AN I 82). The same general sense of *saṅkhāra* as a "cause" recurs in another passage according to which the faculties of pain or pleasure also arise due to a cause (SN V 213). In such contexts, *saṅkhāra* refers to the presence of a "cause" or a "condition".

The passive mode of the term *saṅkhāra*s in its general usage stands for all conditioned phenomena. Examples can be found in two discourses (DN II 198 and SN III 146), which describe the splendour and immense wealth possessed by the Buddha in a former life as a king, all of which has changed and passed away. The word used in this context to refer to the former splendour and wealth is *saṅkhāra*. A similar usage occurs in another discourse, which describes a worldwide draught that leads to the parching up of all water and the destruction of all life as an illustration of the impermanent nature of all *saṅkhāra*s (AN IV 100). In this way, the entire realm of existence can

be covered through this usage of the term *saṅkhāra* in the sense of *saṅkhata*, of what is "conditioned".

The same general usage also underlies the famous last instruction given by the Buddha before entering final *Nibbāna*, which highlights the impermanent nature of all conditioned phenomena, all *saṅkhāra*s (DN II 156: *vayadhammā saṅkhārā*). This theme recurs similarly in another well-known statement according to which all *saṅkhāra*s are impermanent and unsatisfactory, while all *dhamma*s are not self (Dhp 277-279). This is the way things are, the pattern inherent in them (AN I 286).

To view all *saṅkhāra*s as impermanent figures among the meditation practices of frequent occurrence in the discourses (e.g. AN III 83), a frequency that throws into relief the practical importance of contemplation of impermanence. A relation to *dukkha* can be seen in the threefold distinction of *dukkha* (SN V 56), which distinguishes between outright pain, displeasure due to change and the unsatisfactoriness of all *saṅkhāra*s. Thus, the key to gaining higher wisdom and insight is to properly contemplate *saṅkhāra*s (AN II 94).

The development of insight in regard to *saṅkhāra*s features prominently in the insight instructions delivered by the former Buddha Vipassī, which contrast the disadvantage, degradation and defilement of *saṅkhāra*s to the profitable nature of *Nibbāna*. These instructions caused his listeners to progress from stream-entry to full awakening (DN II 42).

Of all *saṅkhāra*s (in the sense of conditioned phenomena), the noble eightfold path is the best (AN II 34). Though the path is still conditioned and thus is part of what is covered by the term *saṅkhāra* in its widest usage, the goal itself no longer pertains to *saṅkhāra*s, but is beyond all *saṅkhāra*s (Dhp 154: *visaṅkhāra*). *Nibbāna* is not "formed", "made up" or "condi-

tioned", being instead "unconditioned", *asaṅkhata* (Ud 80). With full awakening this "unconditioned" is reached, when lust, hatred and delusion have been de-conditioned and eradicated (SN IV 362). Thus only *Nibbāna* goes beyond the range of *saṅkhāra*s even in their most general sense, being the "stilling of all *saṅkhāra*s" (e.g. MN I 436). Such stilling of all *saṅkhāra*s, the *Dhammapada* explains, is happiness indeed (Dhp 368 and 381).



5. Thought / *Vitakka*

In its usage in the early discourses, the term *takka* often has a negative sense, representing the kind of theoretical speculation and sophistry that can lead to erroneous conclusions and wrong views, as described for example in the *Brahmajāla-sutta* (DN I 16ff). Hence *takka* is seen as one of several unreliable sources of knowledge (AN I 189).

The term *vitakka*, however, does not necessarily carry a negative sense. In the case of *vitakka* it is rather the context that decides whether a particular instance of "thought" should be seen in a negative or in a positive light.

This to some extent is symptomatic of the early Buddhist attitude towards thought and conceptions, in that clear awareness of their limitations does not lead to a wholesale rejection. In fact, *vitakka* fulfils an important role in the Buddhist path, a path that eventually leads to what is beyond thought, *atakkāvacara* (e.g. MN I 167).

This pragmatic attitude towards thought as an important but limited tool pervades the early Buddhist analysis of its significance and manifestations. Important aspects of this analysis are the early Buddhist ethical perspective on thought, the psychological analysis of its arising, the meditative approach to dealing with thoughts described in the *Vitakkasaṇṭhāna-sutta*, the role of *vitakka* in the context of absorption and various imageries related to the nature of thought. In what follows, I examine each of these aspects in turn.

5.1 The Ethical Perspective on Thought

The early Buddhist ethical perspective on thought is, according to the *Dvedhāvitakka-sutta*, a direct outcome of the Buddha's pre-awakening experiences (MN I 114). The discourse reports that during the time of his quest for liberation the bodhisattva Gotama developed a clear distinction between unwholesome thoughts (related to sensuality, to ill-will or to harming) and wholesome thoughts (related to renunciation, the absence of ill-will and harmlessness). The rationale behind this distinction is that the former – thoughts related to sensuality, ill-will and harming – will lead to affliction for oneself and for others, and to loss of wisdom. That is, such types of thought lead away from *Nibbāna*. Based on this clear distinction, the bodhisattva made a determined effort to overcome unwholesome thoughts in order to progress towards liberation.

It is this same crucial distinction that underlies the injunction to develop intentions of renunciation, non ill-will and harmlessness as the second factor of the noble eightfold path (e.g. MN III 251). This formulation of right intention as one of the eight factors of the path reveals the fundamental role of this ethical perspective on thoughts and intentions as a means for progress on the path. Hence, according to the *Sabbāsava-sutta*, one of the methods to counter the influxes is precisely not permitting that thoughts related to sensuality, ill-will and harming remain in the mind, firmly opposing them and removing them (MN I 11).

The proper attitude towards such thoughts is exemplified by King Mahāsudassana, who before retiring for meditation told himself: "Stay there, thoughts of sensuality, ill-will and harming, thus far only, thoughts of sensuality, ill-will and harming" (DN II 186). Making such a determination at the time of approaching one's habitual place for meditation practice can have a remarkable impact on the way actual practice will unfold.

The early Buddhist analysis of thought does not exhaust itself in treating only unwholesome thoughts. Positive thinking is often encouraged, thus for example a particularly recommendable set of thoughts comprises the eight thoughts of a superior person. According to these eight thoughts, the Buddha's teaching is for one of little desires, who is content and secluded, energetic and mindful, concentrated and wise, and, above all, for one who does not delight in conceptual proliferation (AN IV 229). The last item in the list is significant in so far as, within the context of a set of commendable reflections, a warning is sound not to allow the thinking tendency of the mind free range to proliferate on its own.

5.2 The Arising of Thought

According to the analysis of thought given in the *Dvedhāvitakka-sutta*, what one frequently thinks about will lead to a corresponding inclination of the mind (MN I 115). As the *Dvedhāvitakka-sutta* explains, to frequently think of sensually alluring matters or else of things that cause ill-will and irritation will strengthen the mental tendency that is responsible for the arising of such thoughts. The way out of this vicious circle – where thought leads to an inclination that then causes further thoughts – lies in awareness of what takes place, followed by a determined effort not to allow unwholesome thoughts to continue.

The development of insight into the nature of thought requires in particular becoming aware of thoughts as they arise, are present for a short while, and then pass away (AN II 45). Practising in this way engenders mindfulness and clear comprehension, and constitutes one of the requirements for developing the four types of analytical knowledge, *paṭisambhidā* (AN IV 33).

In regard to the arising of unwholesome thoughts, an important contributing factor is perception, *saññā*. According to the analysis given in the *Samaṇamaṇḍikā-sutta*, the arising of unwholesome thoughts and intentions is due to a corresponding type of perception (MN II 27). That is, the root of unwholesome thought processes lies in the way perception evaluates experience.

Arisen based on a particular type of perception, thought has the propensity of leading on to "conceptual proliferation", *papañca* (MN I 112), which in turn manifests in ever more thoughts of the same type (DN II 277). As the *Madhupiṇḍika-sutta* clarifies, delight in conceptual proliferations and related perceptions is responsible for quarrel and litigations, for malicious words, false speech and other evils (MN I 109). Thus when monks quarrel amongst each other, the conclusion can be drawn that they may not have sufficiently developed the three wholesome types of thoughts, and instead have probably been dwelling frequently in thoughts related to sensuality, ill-will and harming (AN I 275).

Whether unwholesome thoughts occur when one is walking, standing, seated or lying down, they should definitely not be allowed to continue (It 115). Attempts to act on this injunction will soon enough show that to keep unwholesome thoughts out of the mind requires a determined attitude. This is due to the dynamics responsible for the arising of thought, which only too often takes place without conscious deliberation. On closer inspection ‘our’ thoughts and ideas turn out to be often quite independent of our control.

This state of affairs is familiar terrain for anyone who has practised meditation, where one soon discovers how difficult it is to avoid getting lost in all kinds of thoughts and reflections, daydreams and memories. All this takes place in spite of one’s earlier determination to focus on a particular meditation object.

To remedy this situation, the arising of thought needs to be brought into the light of awareness through a gradual taming of the mind in meditation.

Notably, the discourses reckon it as a manifestation of remarkable meditative expertise when a monk can claim that he has such control over his mind that he will only think the thoughts he really wants to think (MN I 122). Successfully teaching others how to properly direct the thinking activity of the mind therefore deserves to be reckoned a miracle in matters of instruction (DN I 214).

In other words, the ability to be free from distracting thoughts is the product of considerable meditative expertise and certainly not the norm for average practitioners, even though only few may be willing to admit to experiencing recurrent distraction in their own practice.

A gradual perspective on how to deal with thought is provided in a discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*. This discourse compares dealing with thought to the gradual refining of gold, where at first gross impurities are removed, followed by removing finer impurities (AN I 253). In a similar way, when attempting to purify the mind at first the gross types of thought, related to overt unwholesome conduct, have to be overcome. Once these are removed, any type of thought related even distantly to sensuality, ill-will and harming needs to be abandoned. With these gone, there still remains the task to leave behind thoughts related to this and that, such as thoughts about one's relatives, home country and reputation, etc. Once these are also left behind, there still remain reflections about the *Dhamma*. Further development of the mind then leads to deepening concentration.

This gradual build-up provides a helpful perspective for actual practice, in that it indicates what needs to be given priority. Instead of sitting down to meditate with the unrealistic ex-

pectation of experiencing a completely thought-free mind, the task is to recognize the condition of one's mind as it truly is at present and then focus on the grossest type of thought that has manifested, according to the above delineated scheme, which proceeds through the following levels:

– thoughts related to overt unwholesome conduct
– thoughts tinged by some degree of sensuality or anger
– distracted thoughts not indicative of sensuality or anger
– wholesome thoughts related to the *Dhamma*

Proceeding through these levels from gross to subtle offers a reasonable and gradual approach to thoughts. Such a reasonable approach is bound to yield results that are realistically within reach, as all that is required is to overcome the grossest level of thoughts manifest at present. Setting one's target at that level helps avoiding the frustration and feelings of helplessness that may arise from expecting levels of mental quietude that are simply beyond the reach of one's present condition.

Giving oneself the reasonable goal of taking just one step at a time in this gradual progression will go a long way in preparing the ground for eventually experiencing a degree of stillness of the mind that earlier seemed beyond reach. Helpful methods relevant to this gradual approach towards thoughts, in particular in relation to the task of removing unwholesome thoughts, are described in the *Vitakkasaṇṭhāna-sutta.*

5.3 The *Vitakkasaṇṭhāna-sutta*

The "Discourse on Stilling thoughts" offers five methods for dealing with unwholesome thoughts (MN I 119). The first of these recommends that, when unwholesome thoughts arise, one should give attention to something wholesome instead in order to be able to develop unification of the mind. To illus-

trate this approach, the *Vitakkasaṇṭhāna-sutta* describes how a carpenter removes a coarse peg with a finer peg. This simile conveys the sense of a gradual procedure. Just as the carpenter is not able to simply pull out the coarse peg, so the arising of unwholesome thoughts at times cannot simply be stopped. By way of a gradual approach, instead of attempting to stop thought one tries to change the object of thought, directing the flow of thoughts present in the mind from what is unwholesome to what is wholesome.

The ingenuity of this approach lies in not trying to just force thought to stop on the spot. Instead, the existing thought flow is simply diverted into another direction, somewhat like channelling a running course of water to one's purposes, or avoiding a particular topic during a conversation by broaching another one. If done skilfully, this method requires little effort and may swiftly dispense with unwholesome thoughts.

Eventually this will lead to a stage where it is possible to leave behind wholesome thoughts as well in order to develop concentration, comparable to the carpenter taking out the fine peg, after it has performed its function of removing the coarse peg. But, needless to say, arriving at the removal of the fine peg requires properly removing the coarse peg first.

If this first method does not work, the *Vitakkasaṇṭhāna-sutta* recommends reflecting on the danger inherent in allowing unwholesome thoughts to continue. The discourse illustrates this approach with the example of a beautiful young man or woman, fond of ornaments, who finds that the corpse of a snake or a dog, or even the corpse of a human being, has been hung around his or her neck. This vivid image conveys a sense of urgency and also of shame and disgust that is appropriate in regard to the unbefitting nature of what is going on in a mind overwhelmed by unwholesome thoughts.

In practical terms this means that once the gentle approach of redirecting the course of thought has not been successful, a more direct confrontation by clearly recognizing the objectionable nature of the unwholesome thoughts is required. This would not imply an involvement with the actual content of the particular thought, but much rather a general recognition of the thoughts as expressive of a particular defilement, coupled with awareness of the harmful nature of this defilement. The resulting sense of urgency and shame will give additional strength to one's attempt to redirect the flow of thoughts into calm waters. In actual practice, this may take the form of a flash-like recognition of the degrading nature of what is taking place in the mind, followed by a firm but gentle nudging of the mind towards wholesomeness in accordance with the first method.

The third method, in case the earlier two have not been successful, is to just forget about these thoughts. This involves a conscious effort to set aside the issue that is agitating the mind, comparable to someone who does not want to see something and therefore just closes the eyes or simply turns away.

The point behind this recommendation appears to be that, given that unwholesome thoughts still continue, it is fairly probable that some concrete issue or event lies underneath their persistent recurrence. In such a case, the issue or event needs to be consciously set aside until a later time, when it will be possible and appropriate to deal with it.

If this also did not work, the fourth method is to give attention to stilling the thought formations, *vitakkasaṅkhārasaṇṭhāna*. The implications of this expression require some interpretation, based on the simile given to illustrate this particular method. This simile describes someone who is walking fast. On reflecting, this person might wonder why he or she is walking so fast and decide to rather walk in a slow manner. Further reflection might lead to the decision to stand still, or even sit

down, or eventually to fully relax by lieing down. The point of the simile appears to be that through becoming aware of what is taking place, this person is able to let go of the strain of unnecessary activity and abandon an uncomfortable posture for a more comfortable posture.

Applied to the case of the recurrent arising of unwholesome thoughts, this would then imply giving attention to how these thoughts agitate the mind. Clear awareness of this leads on to inquiring why these thoughts are being entertained, comparable to wondering why one is walking so fast. That is, the volitional driving force behind those thoughts is brought into the light of attention and is put into question. Clear awareness of the thought process, *vitakka*, and the volitional driving force behind it, *saṅkhāra*, enables to calm both and brings about their stilling, *saṇṭhāna*.

In this way, the occurrence of unwholesome thoughts becomes the meditation object itself. Mindful investigation turns to the manifestation and underlying driving force of the unwholesome thoughts, a mode of observation that at the same time engenders a gradual calming of the mental agitation that has been reigning in the mind.

Should all these methods prove to be unsuccessful, as a last resort the *Vitakkasaṇṭhāna-sutta* recommends the use of force of the mind to expel unwholesome thoughts, comparable to a strong man who takes hold of a weak man and overpowers him.

Notably, the same method is elsewhere included among a set of practices that the Buddha tried out before his awakening, but which did not lead him to liberation (MN I 242). This makes it clear why the *Vitakkasaṇṭhāna-sutta* presents this forceful approach only as a last resort, when all the other methods have failed to overcome the recurrent arising of unwholesome thoughts. Even though forceful restraint of the mind on

its own will not lead to awakening, it has its place at the present junction since the unwholesome thoughts are evidently so strong that the mind is completely overwhelmed. Stopping them through the use of force will at least ensure that these unwholesome thoughts will not spill over into some unwholesome activity. To use a modern example, the forceful method is somewhat like an emergency brake. Though an emergency brake will certainly not lead to progress in one's journey, it has its place in order to avoid an accident.

Once by skilful use of one or more of these five methods in accordance with the demands of the present situation it has become possible to replace unwholesome thoughts with their wholesome counterpart, the mind is free to go deeper.

5.4 *Vitakka* in Meditation

As the *Dvedhāvitakka-sutta* indicates, even though thoughts related to renunciation, non ill-will and harmlessness are entirely wholesome, yet, excessive thinking will tire the mind and not lead to concentration. Hence at some point, after sustained progress through the above depicted gradual procedure has been made, even wholesome thoughts need to be left behind in order to steady the mind and lead it to deeper concentration (MN I 116).

Though deeper stages of concentration go beyond thought, this does not mean that *vitakka* has no place at all in the context of early Buddhist meditation practice. In fact, several reflective types of meditation are described in the discourses, involving various recollections, *anussati*. These can take the Buddha, his teachings or the community as their object, or else one's own virtue or generosity, or qualities one has in common with those reborn as heavenly beings (AN III 312).

In the realm of mindfulness meditation proper, thought also has its place. This can be seen from the instructions given in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, which frequently express what is to be contemplated in direct speech, marked by the particle *iti*. Thus in the case of contemplating feelings, for example, the instruction is that when experiencing a pleasant or a painful feeling, one should clearly know "I experience a pleasant feeling" or "I experience a painful feeling" (MN I 59). The subtle level of mental verbalization introduced in this way helps to strengthen clarity of recognition. With more advanced levels of practice, such mental verbalization can then be dispensed with.

In the context of the development of absorption (*jhāna*), *vitakka* also has an important function that will be left behind only with deeper levels of concentration reached subsequent to the attainment of the first absorption. To understand the absorption factor *vitakka* as referring to conceptual thought in this context would conflict with descriptions of the first absorption given elsewhere in the discourses. These indicate that the first absorption is a far deeper experience than the type of mental condition in which conceptual thought and reflection take place.

An important clue occurs in the *Mahācattārīsaka-sutta*, which in a list of near synonyms for right intention includes "application of the mind", *cetaso abhiniropanā*, alongside *vitakka* (MN III 73). This suggests that the range of meaning of *vitakka* goes beyond conceptual thought as such, covering also the sense of an inclination of the mind. Both nuances of *vitakka* are in fact closely related to each other, since to reflect or think on something requires an inclination of the mind towards the topic or issue at hand.

The interrelation between these two nuances of *vitakka* can also be seen in the realm of speech. Here *vitakka* is, together with *vicāra*, a formation responsible for speaking, *vacīsaṅkhā-*

ra (MN I 301). Now when one is speaking, at times one may verbally express something that has already been fully formulated in the mind, fully "thought" out. Yet, at other times there may just be a general sense of direction about what one is going to say and one may still have to search the right words while speaking. This general sense of direction also falls within the range of meaning of *vitakka*, not only the fully formulated thoughts at those times when we have already planned our speech. This sense of a general direction, in the sense of an application or inclination of the mind, requires the support of *vicāra* in order to be maintained consistently.

Just as in relation to formulating speech, *vitakka* and *vicāra* express a sense of mental direction and its sustaining, so too in regard to deepening concentration these two fulfil the same role. In the case of deepening concentration, *vitakka* stands for "initial application of the mind" that is supported by *vicāra*, "sustained application of the mind". Such inclining of the mind has to leave behind conceptual thinking in order to lead the mind into the attainment of the first absorption. With the second absorption, then, even this last vestige of mental activity through inclining the mind is left behind, hence the mind reaches true inner silence (SN II 273; cf. also Th 650 and Th 999). Such silence is not only free from conceptual thought, but also free from the 'noise' of deliberate mental application.

5.5 Thought Imagery

The nature of thought is illustrated in the early discourses with the help of several similes. One of these compares the arising of thought to a crow that has been bound to a string and then is tossed up into the air by children (SN I 207 and Sn 271). This imagery brings out how the movement of thought can easily give an illusion of personal freedom. But on closer inspection this personal freedom turns out to be a condition of

bondage, comparable to the crow that flies up into the air, only to fall back on the ground due to the string to which it has been bound.

This condition of bondage is particularly evident with thoughts of an unwholesome type, and it is such types of thought with which most similes are concerned. Unwholesome thoughts are comparable to corruptions of gold that need to be removed in order for the gold to become bright and workable, fit for being fashioned into an ornament by a goldsmith (AN I 253). Unwholesome thoughts are also like a cloud of dust that should be settled, just as a shower of rain will settle any dust (It 83). The images of dust and impurities bring out the obstructive nature of unwholesome thoughts and the need to remove them in order to access the true potential of the mind.

According to the above-mentioned *Vitakkasaṇṭhāna-sutta*, unwholesome thoughts are like the carcass of a dead snake or dog, or even the corpse of a human being that is put around the neck of a young man or woman who is fond of ornaments (MN I 119). This imagery brings out in particular the objectionable nature of unwholesome thoughts. The same is also inherent in another simile that compares unwholesome thoughts to flies that are attracted by rotting meat (AN I 280). The rotting meat in this simile stands for greed and ill-will. These similes emphasize the degrading and even disgusting nature of such thoughts, and the degree to which they can defile the mind.

Successful removal of unwholesome thoughts then is comparable to the ability of a king's elephant to successfully overcome an enemy in battle (AN II 117). The need to restrain unwholesome thoughts is similar to a cowherd who has to beat his cows in order to prevent them from straying into the ripe crops (MN I 115). These images draw out the importance of confronting unwholesome thought. This importance is not only related to mental culture as such, but also to the conditioned

impact of thought on subsequent action. This relationship is brought out in yet another simile, according to which thought is like smoke at night, in the sense of representing the planning activity of the mind, whereas the implementation of these plans compares to fire during the day (MN I 144).

The importance of overcoming unwholesome thoughts is also reflected in a twin verse in the *Dhammapada*, which contrasts those who are in bondage, due to being unable to control thought, to those who master thought and thereby go beyond bondage.

"For a person overwhelmed by thought
Who, strongly impassioned, looks [at things] as beautiful,
Craving grows ever more.
He, indeed, makes strong [his own state of] bondage.

Who delights in calming thought,
Ever mindful develops [perception] of the absence of beauty,
He will remove [craving].
He will cut Māra's bondage" (Dhp 349-350).

6. Wise Attention / *Yoniso Manasikāra*

Yoniso manasikāra indicates a form of "attention" that is "thorough" and "penetrative", and therefore "wise". To explore the connotations of *yoniso manasikāra*, I will begin by examining the terms *yoniso* and *manasikāra* individually, followed by surveying passages that are of relevance to the implications of the expression *yoniso manasikāra*, and to its importance in the thought-world of the Pāli discourses.

6.1 Wise (*Yoniso*)

The term *yoniso* derives from *yoni*, which stands for a "womb", a "matrix", or a "place of origin". Thus *yoniso* can convey the sense of doing something "thoroughly" or in a "penetrative" manner, in the sense of going "down to its origins". The idea of doing something in a penetrative manner can be seen in a simile that describes how examining a lump of foam in a manner that is *yoniso* leads to the realization that this lump of foam is empty of any substance (SN III 140). In the context of this simile, *yoniso* conveys the idea of penetrating through the outer surface of phenomena – in this case the surface of a lump of foam – and thereby realizing the true nature of what is found beneath this surface.

The nuance of thoroughness, in the sense of doing something intensively, recurs in a description of someone who is stirred by the prospect of disease or death and thereon endeavours "thoroughly", *yoniso*, in order to progress on the path to liberation (AN II 115). Another example would be a verse, which

proclaims that the deathless can be attained even today by those who apply themselves "thoroughly" (Thī 513). A monk who in this way "thoroughly" endeavours will reach the destruction of *dukkha* (It 10). The idea of thoroughness would also be relevant for an occurrence of *yoniso* in a verse that compares "thoroughly" restraining the mind to a mahout who controls an elephant (Dhp 326).

At times, *yoniso* can also convey the sense of "proper" or "appropriate". This meaning underlies a passage where a king finds out that the Buddhist monastics make good use of robe material given to them, as once their robes become worn, they employ the cloth as mattress coverings, foot-wipers, etc., and the shreds left over after such usage are kneaded with mud and used for construction work. This convinces the king that the monks make use of the cloth they receive in a "proper" manner, *yoniso* (Vin II 292). The nuance of appropriateness could also be relevant to a passage in the *Bhūmija-sutta*, according to which it is not beneficial to live the holy life in an "improper" manner, *ayoniso* (MN III 138).

Besides the nuances of thoroughness and appropriateness, *yoniso* often conveys the idea of doing something in a "wise" manner. This sense of the term becomes particularly evident with a set of similes, where the opposite term *ayoniso* stands for doing something in an "unwise" or even "foolish" manner.

One of these similes describes a woman wondering if the child she is pregnant with will be a male and thus become the heir to the family's wealth. In order to find out, she takes a knife and cuts open her own belly. As a result, she passes away together with the embryo. Such a way of acting is to seek for an inheritance in an "unwise" manner, *ayoniso*, like fools would do (DN II 331).

The same imagery of seeking for something in an "unwise" manner, *ayoniso*, recurs in another simile which describes how

a group of villagers tries to find the sound of a trumpet by speaking to the trumpet, shaking it and hitting it (DN II 337).

A third instance of the same imagery involves making a fire. Here someone tries to kindle a fire by just chopping up the fire sticks, a rather "unwise" manner, *ayoniso*, of searching for fire (DN II 341). These three similes employ *ayoniso* in a way that clearly suggests the nuance of "wise" for the opposite term *yoniso*.

The sense of doing something in a "wise" manner as a central implication of the qualification *yoniso* finds confirmation in several occurrences of the term itself. Thus to put questions in a way that is *yoniso*, or to answer them in such a way, is the hallmark of a wise person (AN I 103). In contrast, one who is not capable of asking questions in such a manner will be reckoned a fool (DN I 118).

Another type of context involves "wisely" reflecting on the import of the teachings one has heard (Th 347). To investigate the teachings in a manner that is *yoniso* leads to purification and wisdom (SN I 34 and AN IV 3). Thus *yoniso* can qualify the type of wise mental investigation that leads to liberation (Thī 85); or stand for wisely seeing with insight the true characteristics of reality (Th 1117).

In summary, *yoniso* in its early canonical usage conveys a sense of doing something "thoroughly", in an "appropriate" manner, and "wisely". These nuances cannot be neatly separated from each other and, even though at times one of these meanings may be prominent, in some instances it would be difficult to decide in favour of just one of them. Thus the above selection of examples only intends to reflect the range of nuances conveyed by *yoniso*, without thereby implying that each occurrence has to necessarily correspond to only one of these three related meanings. An example for the convergence of these three nuances would be a verse that describes how a

monk reached liberation after having practised in a *yoniso* manner (Th 158). His practice would need to have been "thorough", must have been "proper", and certainly was "wise".

6.2 Attention (*Manasikāra*)

Translated literally, *manasi karoti* means to "do" or to "make" something "in the mind". Being one of the constituents of "name", *nāma* (MN I 53), *manasikāra* is an ever-present aspect of the mind. As such, *manasikāra* lies at the origin of all experienced phenomena (AN IV 339); since phenomena arise with the arising of attention (SN V 184).

Given that *manasikāra* is present in all states of mind, from the perspective of mental cultivation the crucial question is: To what object and in what manner is this faculty of attention directed? If, for example, *manasikāra* focuses on the feature of physical beauty, lust will invade the mind (MN I 26). Or else, if *manasikāra* dwells on the bad qualities of another person, anger will arise (AN III 187). Taking into account the need of avoiding the dire consequences of wrongly directed *manasikāra*, the Buddha would teach his disciples how attention should be directed (DN I 214). This "how" of directing attention should be *yoniso*, that is: "wise", "thorough" and "appropriate".

6.3 The Implications of Wise Attention

Yoniso manasikāra is thus a form of "attention" purposely directed in a manner that is "wise" and at the same time "thorough" and "appropriate". A central task of wise attention, in line with its nature as a form of attention that goes to the very origin of things, is to explore the conditioned nature of phenomena. A case in point can be seen in the description of the process of mental development that preceded the awakening of

the former Buddha Vipassī. His understanding of dependent arising took place through wise attention (DN II 31 or SN II 5). Wise attention performed the same role in relation to the awakening of other Buddhas, including Gotama Buddha, who similarly developed insight into dependent arising with the help of wise attention (SN II 9-10; see also SN II 104).

In all these cases, wise attention was instrumental in arousing the wisdom that led to realization. Since Buddhas awaken on their own, without being taught the way to liberation by others, the potential of wise attention in preparing the ground for the arising of liberating insight can hardly be overestimated.

Another discourse confirms that wise attention performed a central role in relation to Gotama Buddha's attainment of total liberation. According to this discourse, his awakening took place through wise attention and through striving that was similarly directed in a wise manner, *yoniso* (Vin I 22 or SN I 105).

The practical implications of wise attention in relation to dependent arising are spelled out in several discourses, which clarify that such wise and penetrative attention focuses on the specific conditionality of phenomena: "when this is, that comes to be, with the arising of this, that arises", etc. (e.g. SN II 95).

Dependent arising is, however, certainly not the only object of wise attention, a mental quality which much rather is of relevance to the entire field of insight. Especially wise attention directed to the impermanent nature of the five aggregates [affected by] clinging has a considerable potential of leading to the destruction of lust and therewith to liberation (SN III 52). It goes without saying that a similar outcome can also be attained if wise attention is directed to the impermanent nature of the senses or their objects (SN IV 142).

Besides awareness of impermanence, the range of wise attention also comprises giving attention to the five aggregates [af-

fected by] clinging as something that is unsatisfactory, a disease, a tumour, a dart, a misery, an affliction, alien, disintegrating, empty and not-self (SN III 167). This series of qualifications builds on a foundation in awareness of impermanence and then leads on to the other two characteristics – unsatisfactoriness and not-self – described from a series of related angles. The comprehensiveness of the resultant insight perspective is such that wise attention developed in this way can lead from the level of a worldling all the way up to complete liberation.

Cultivated in this way, wise attention can become a powerful tool for de-conditioning the way perception misinterprets the world of experience. The operational mechanism of perceptual misinterpretations through unwise attention is based on the very nature of perception (*saññā*), whose task is to match information received through the sense doors with mental labels and concepts, leading to various associations and memories.

These concepts and associations are only too often tinged by desire, aversion and delusion, being the outcome of habitual reactions under the influence of defilements. Such habits have been built up throughout the past and continue to be fortified in the present, whenever such reactions recur.

Due to the influence of these habitual reactions and associations, whatever is experienced will be apprehended together with the subjective notions the mind projects onto the data of the senses. Both come together in an almost inextricable mix, and the perceiver is mostly unaware of the degree to which his or her experience is influenced by preconceived notions and thereby mirrors and confirms subjective prejudices.

Unwise and perhaps also somewhat 'superficial' attention perpetuates this state of affairs, where the falsification of data through perception remains unquestioned. The remedy here is a wise and penetrative form of attention that goes beyond the

superficial appearance of things in order to come to know their true nature, however much disappointing this may be. Continuous training in wise attention will eventually change the way perception apprehends the world, whereby awareness of the true characteristics of reality will gradually become as ingrained in perceptual appraisal as the earlier habitual reactions.

In view of this potential, it comes as no surprise that wise attention is a central condition for the arising of the awakening factors, just as its opposite unwise attention is responsible for the arising of the hindrances (SN V 94 and SN V 84). The discourses express this by reckoning wise attention the "nutriment" for the awakening factors (SN V 104). That is, attention that is thorough and wise quite literally "nourishes" the arising and establishment of those mental conditions that are directly responsible for awakening.

In particular, wise attention directed to the distinction between what is wholesome and what is unwholesome nourishes the awakening factor of investigation-of-phenomena; wise attention aimed at exertion and effort nourishes the awakening factor of energy; wise attention to tranquillity of body and mind nourishes the awakening factor of tranquillity; and wise attention directed to the characteristic of collectedness of the mind nourishes the awakening factor of concentration (SN V 104). In the case of the awakening factors of mindfulness, joy and equanimity, wise attention should be aimed at whatever can become a basis for these awakening factors in the present moment.

Besides standing in a close relationship to the development of the awakening factors, wise attention is also relevant for examining if the factors of awakening are well established in one's own mind (SN V 76), or even for the remarkable ability of knowing if the mind of another is ripe for attaining any of the four levels of awakening (DN III 107).

The imagery of providing a "nutriment" for certain mental qualities or factors also applies to the hindrances. Here wise attention has the task of attending in such a way as to deprive the hindrances of nourishment. This takes place by directing wise attention to the absence of beauty, to loving kindness, to exertion and effort, to peacefulness of the mind, and to the distinction between what is wholesome and what is unwholesome in order to "de-nourish", as it were, the hindrances of sensual desire, ill-will, sloth-and-torpor, restlessness-and-worry, and doubt (SN V 105).

In a more general way, the task of wise attention comprises overcoming all three roots of evil. By wisely and thoroughly attending to the absence of beauty, the root defilement of lust will no longer arise in the mind. Attending wisely to loving kindness will lead to overcoming the root defilement of anger; and by dint of simply developing wise attention as such delusion will be overcome (AN I 200). It is noteworthy that just wise attention itself is the chief factor responsible for avoiding delusion, which further reinforces the importance of its role as a "wise" form of attention that leads to insight.

A practical example of how one should deal with unwholesome mental qualities through wise attention can be found in a discourse that describes a monk whose mind was overwhelmed by thoughts related to sensuality, ill-will and harming. A *deva*, who had become aware of the monk's condition, admonished him (SN I 203). The *deva* told the monk that his condition was due to unwise attention and advised him that he should give up his unwholesome forms of thinking. Instead, he should direct his thoughts in a wise manner, *yoniso.* This he could do by recollecting his teacher, the teaching, the community, or his own virtue. Directing his thoughts in such a wise manner, joy will arise and lead him onwards on the path to liberation from *dukkha*.

The advice given by the *deva* points to the potential of the practice of recollection. Such practice offers a helpful tool for engendering inspiration and joy in order to overcome a situation of inner stagnation or even moments when one is overwhelmed by mental defilements.

A whole range of practical examples for wise attention can be found in the *Sabbāsava-sutta*, whose exposition presents a series of activities that lead to overcoming the influxes. According to the introductory statement in this discourse, the destruction of the influxes requires knowing and seeing, and such knowing and seeing comes about through wise attention (MN I 7). That is, wise attention serves as a heading for all the methods listed in the *Sabbāsava-sutta*, a position that reflects its relevance in relation to the task of eradicating the influxes.

Of the seven methods for overcoming the influxes listed in the *Sabbāsava-sutta*, the first requires directing wise attention to the four noble truths, which will lead to the attainment of stream-entry. Such wise attention stands in contrast to unwisely attending to meaningless questions of the type "am I at present?", etc. (MN I 8). The other six methods involve reflecting "wisely", *yoniso*, in order to:

– establish sense-restraint,
– properly use one's requisites,
– patiently endure vicissitudes of climate, etc.,
– avoid dangerous situations,
– remove unwholesome thoughts from the mind,
– develop the factors of awakening.

The range of activities assembled in the *Sabbāsava-sutta* reflects the compass of wise attention, which covers proper use of requisites just as much as developing the mental qualities that lead to attaining awakening. Whether one is wisely reflecting that food should not be taken for amusement, but only in order to maintain the body, or whether the factors of awaken-

ing are developed in such a manner that the mind inclines towards cessation and letting go – all such activities fall under the heading of wise attention, developed for the sake of removing the influxes.

The presentation given in the *Sabbāsava-sutta* shows that wise attention can take place at a reflective conceptual level of the mind as well as during deep meditation. Several discourses in fact show how a more reflective type of wise attention can serve as a transition from hearing teachings to engaging in actual practice. Yet, wise attention is also part of the practice itself, since it includes the wise form of attention that is present during deeper stages of insight contemplation.

6.4 The importance of Wise Attention

The importance of wise attention for progress on the path to liberation can be gauged from its appearance in several listings of the factors that are required for reaching stream-entry. A rather brief listing speaks of two main factors for arousing right view: the voice of another and wise attention (MN I 294 or AN I 87).

Elsewhere in the discourses, the same theme is treated in more detail by listing four factors of stream-entry. These comprise (e.g. DN III 227):

- association with superior human beings,
- listening to the proper teachings,
- wise attention,
- practice undertaken according to these teachings.

The listing clearly follows a temporal sequence, delineating the main steps that eventually lead to the attainment of stream-entry. The obvious and most basic requirement is to come in contact with a superior human being who transmits the type of proper teachings that, on being put into practice, can lead to

liberation. Another basic requirement is to be willing to listen to such teachings. Given that much, one needs to listen to the teachings without being mentally distracted, in order to be able to develop single-minded wise attention on such an occasion (AN III 175). The final step in the series, then, requires putting the teachings into practice.

Additional details on this series of steps leading to stream-entry can be gathered from some discourses, which depict a progression from listening to the proper teachings via the establishment of "faith" or "confidence", *saddhā*, to wise attention (e.g. AN V 115). The inner faith or confidence gained from listening to the proper teachings serves as a "nutriment" for wise attention, since the inspiration developed in such way quite literally nourishes the development and maintenance of wise and thorough attention (AN V 115). To be able to rouse such inspiration requires overcoming three adverse conditions: forgetfulness, thoughtlessness and confusion (AN V 145).

Once that much has been achieved, wise attention plays its crucial role in bridging the transition from passive reception of the teachings to their active implementation. In this way, wise attention can become the basis for overcoming sensuality and other unwholesome qualities; for tranquillizing any gross type of activity by way of body, speech and mind; and for developing insight into what is wholesome and what is unwholesome (DN II 214).

The directional input provided by wise attention is comparable to the early morning dawn. Just as the dawn is the harbinger of the rising of the sun, similarly wise attention is the harbinger of the noble eightfold path (SN V 31) and of the seven factors of awakening (SN V 79). This simile points to a similarity of function between wise attention and right view. Wise attention is of such importance in this respect that some discourses declare no other mental quality to be more helpful for

arousing the noble eightfold path (SN V 35), or for developing the awakening factors (SN V 101).

In short, all wholesome qualities have their root in wise attention (SN V 91), which is the decisive factor for undertaking wholesome deeds (AN V 87). Thus wise attention is the factor par excellence for arousing wholesome qualities and for overcoming unwholesome qualities (AN I 13), thereby leading to great benefit and ensuring the endurance of the teachings (AN I 18). Besides, the development of wise attention also constitutes a source of delight, joy and happiness (DN III 288).

As a form of actual practice, wise attention is of continuous relevance all the way from the first steps of practice to final liberation, a progressive development during which what initially was a form of reflection on teachings one has heard grows into a silent attention directed to the true nature of reality during deeper stages of meditation.

As a form of attention present during intense insight practice, wise attention directed to the impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self nature of the five aggregates [affected by] clinging is a form of meditation practice undertaken by a worldling as well as by an arahant (SN III 167). That is, independent of what level of liberation someone may have reached already, wise attention developed in this way constitutes the path to the next higher stage.

For fully awakened ones the same form of wise attention is still of relevance, since it provides a pleasant abiding in the present moment and because it engenders mindfulness and clear comprehension.

The importance of wise attention as a form of attention that leads to various stages of awakening is also reflected in the *Theragāthā*, where verses repeatedly relate the attainment of liberation to the arising of wise attention on that particular oc-

casion. In such contexts, the task of wise attention is to reveal the true nature of experience and thereby cause the arising of utter disenchantment.

Examples are the verses of Nāgasamāla, who attained liberation when directing wise attention to the vision of a dancing girl giving a performance (Th 269); Sundarasamudda, who faced temptation by a courtesan with wise attention (Th 464); Candana, who maintained wise attention when encountering his former wife (Th 301); Rājadatta, who kept to wise attention when contemplating a corpse (Th 318); Bhagu, who was full of wise attention after struggling to overcome torpor (Th 273); and Sappadāsa, who was saved from committing suicide by wise attention (Th 409).

In the majority of these cases, wise attention appears to be directed to the absence of beauty in particular, *asubha*, whereby not only the hindrance of sensual desire can be overcome, but even, as these instances show, the goal of final liberation can be won. But struggle with sensuality is clearly not the only occasion when wise attention can unfold its awakening potential. The above examples show that it can also serve its purpose when having to confront torpor or being under the influence of suicidal intentions.

In sum, then, *yoniso manasikāra* as a "wise" and at the same time "thorough" and "appropriate" type of attention has a remarkably broad scope within the context of early Buddhist mental training, ranging from attention given to the proper attitude towards food and similar requisites, or from attending single-mindedly to the oral delivery of teachings, all the way up to the penetrative type of attention that heralds the breakthrough to awakening. Given its range of applicability, wise attention thus stands out as one of the key aspects of the early Buddhist path to liberation. That is:

"Wise attention – this is one factor that conduces to distinction. Unwise attention – this is one factor that conduces to ruin" (DN III 273).

7. Insight / *Vipassanā*

Vipassanā and the corresponding verb *vipassati* stand for the development of a form of vision that "sees", *passati*, in an "intensified" and also "analytical" manner, *vi-*, hence *vipassanā* stands for "insight". Such insight is the key factor for liberation.

Progress towards liberation sets in fact the context for the early Buddhist conception of *vipassanā*, which stands for "liberating insight", that is, for the type of insight whose growth culminates in the total release of the mind from the grip of defilements and delusion. That is, "insight is not knowledge in the general sense, but penetrative knowledge acquired as a result of not looking *at* but looking *through* things" (Nanayakkara 1993: 580).

In what follows, I first examine occurrences of the term *vipassanā* and the related verb *vipassati* in the Pāli discourses, in order to explore the significance of the term in its early Buddhist usage. Next I turn to the practical development of insight, illustrated with the help of mindfulness meditation. Then I examine the progress of insight reflected in the scheme of insight knowledges.

7.1 The Significance of Insight

In the thought-world of early Buddhism, the chief task of insight is the development of wisdom, which in turn leads to the eradication of ignorance (AN I 61). The development of wisdom requires insight into impermanence in particular. Thus,

according to the standard definition in the discourses, to be wise is to be "endowed with wisdom regarding the arising and disappearance [of phenomena], which is noble and penetrative, leading to the complete destruction of *dukkha*" (e.g. MN I 356). This passage sets the parameters for the development of wisdom and insight. It indicates that, based on penetrative awareness of impermanence as the crucial foundation, the growth of true insight and wisdom manifests in a gradual ennobling of the practitioner and eventually culminates in total liberation from *dukkha*. That is, wisdom and insight, from an early Buddhist perspective, have a clear scope and purpose. Their scope is the true nature of reality and their purpose is liberation.

As the above description indicates, the basis for developing insight into the true nature of reality is penetrative awareness of its impermanent and therewith conditioned nature. Penetrative in so far as such insightful awareness needs to quite literally penetrate into every aspect of personal experience (Th 1091). Such comprehensive seeing with insight will ensure that the entire gamut of what is usually experienced as 'I' and 'mine' is instead seen with insight as a product of conditions and subject to change and alteration.

Comprehensive insight into impermanence then needs to lead on to insight into unsatisfactoriness and not-self or emptiness (Th 1117). That is, once a clear perception of impermanence, *aniccasaññā*, has been established, the progress of insight requires viewing what is impermanent as unsatisfactory, *anicce dukkhasaññā*, and that which is unsatisfactory needs in turn to be seen as devoid of a self, *dukkhe anattasaññā*.

The locative forms *anicce* and *dukkhe* indicate that the progression from one of these three characteristics to the next does not involve a change of object, but a change of perspective. What has been seen with insight as impermanent, is now seen

as unsatisfactory, in fact it is precisely because it is impermanent that it is unsatisfactory. This dynamic is reflected in a standard teaching on the three characteristics, found often in the discourses. In this teaching, the inquiry "is what is impermanent unsatisfactory or agreeable?" leads to the conclusion that it can only be unsatisfactory (e.g. MN I 138).

The same teaching then continues by inquiring if it is appropriate to regard what is impermanent, unsatisfactory and subject to change as "this is mine, this I am, this is my self". The inevitable conclusion is that this would indeed be inappropriate. Needless to say, passages like this are guided forms of meditation for the development of liberating insight.

In sum, once the impermanent has been seen as unsatisfactory, it is then to be viewed as devoid of anything that could justify the conceit ‘I am’ or any appropriation in terms of ‘this is mine’. Concurrent with this progression of insight is a deepening appreciation of the conditioned nature of all aspects of subjective experience, an appreciation that from its starting point as a corollary to impermanence reaches its culmination in the direct vision of not-self with the break-through to awakening.

A discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* presents these three progressive perceptions together with "perception of eradication", *pahānasaññā*, and "perception of dispassion", *virāgasaññā* – all five perceptions having the purpose of leading to liberation (AN III 85). This presentation thus combines the scope of insight – impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self – with the purpose of insight, namely eradication and dispassion. Such dispassion, then, is the proximate cause for liberation in a dependent sequence that leads from ignorance to the destruction of the influxes (SN II 30).

True insight is diametrically opposed to the four perversions (of perception, of the mind and of views), *vipallāsa*, which

'mis'-take what is impermanent, unsatisfactory, not-self and unattractive for being the opposite (AN II 52). Undermining the force of these perversions through insight is what gradually eradicates the defilements in the mind and thereby leads to increasing degrees of dispassion.

Instead of succumbing to the perverting force of these four perversions, insight reveals an ever more correct vision of the world that is in accordance with reality. Such a vision is a necessary requirement for progress to liberation, in fact all "those who have been quenched in this world, had insight in accordance with reality" (DN III 196).

Another quality of particular relevance for the development of insight is the investigation-of-phenomena awakening factor. The *Ānāpānasati-sutta* explains that this awakening factor stands representative for the activities of inspecting, scrutinizing and examining with wisdom (MN III 85). A crucial support for the awakening factor of investigation-of-phenomena, literally its "nutriment", *āhāra*, is wise attention. Such wise attention should be directed towards what is wholesome and unwholesome, in the sense of what is blameable, inferior and dark in contrast to what is blameless, superior and bright.

This points to another aspect of the development of insight, a development that stands within an ethical context and inevitably has ethical repercussions. Genuine insight, from an early Buddhist perspective, needs to be based on a sound moral foundation.

In turn, growth of insight will further strengthen this moral foundation, making certain unwholesome deeds a sheer impossibility for one endowed with higher insight. Such gradual ennobling through insight reaches its culmination point with the arahant. By dint of profound insight and inner purity an arahant is simply incapable of undertaking such deeds as deliberately depriving another living being of life, appropriating

what belongs to others by way of theft, or consciously speaking falsehood (MN I 523). The profound insight and concomitant inner purification reached with full liberation makes it also impossible for an arahant to engage in sexual activity or else to hoard up things for the sake of sensual enjoyment

That is, genuine growth of insight can be measured in terms of the degree to which true inner detachment manifests in ethical purity and aloofness from sensuality.

The potential of developing insight can be seen in a discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, which reports instructions given to a monk who is under the influence of sloth-and-torpor as well as doubt and who no longer delights in living a life of celibacy (AN III 70). According to these instructions, he should combine insight into what is wholesome with sense-restraint, with contentment in regard to food and with wakefulness, and he should develop, day and night, the mental qualities related to awakening, *bodhipakkhikā dhammā*.

These instructions set up a clear behavioural context for insight, and at the same time highlight its final purpose. The discourse reports that, as a result of this teaching, the monk in question overcame his problems and developed insight all the way up to full liberation.

The need to base the growth of insight on a foundation in appropriate conduct is also highlighted in another discourse in the same collection. According to this discourse, neither the monks nor the Buddha had ever seen or heard that anyone reached final liberation without having developed insight in regard to what is wholesome in conjunction with sense-restraint, contentment with food, wakefulness, and development of the mental qualities related to awakening (AN III 301)

The potential benefits of the path of insight are available to all those who engage in its practice and gender is definitely of

no relevance in this context, as the nun Somā pointed out to Māra, the Evil One. In reply to his insinuation that women are by nature incapable of higher attainments, Somā clarified that womanhood is of no relevance once the mind is well concentrated and the teaching is properly seen with insight (SN I 129; see also Thī 61). Though the path of insight is open for men and women alike, yet, of both there are only few that indeed see with insight, as for the most part the world remains blind (Dhp 174).

The liberating potential of insight is reflected in the *Itivuttaka*, where a series of discourses take up various defilements – such as greed, anger, delusion, conceit, etc. – in each case indicating that those who truly understand the respective defilement, by abandoning it with insight, go beyond being reborn in this world (It 1-3). The point made by this set of discourses is easily underestimated. It is only with insight into the nature of defilements, and more specifically insight into their arising in one's own mind, that they can indeed be fully abandoned.

Not only can defilements be overcome, but according to the *Ākaṅkheyya-sutta* even other types of aspirations can find fulfilment – ranging from merit for one's supporters via being dear to one's fellow practitioners all the way up to final liberation – if the development of insight is undertaken in conjunction with mental tranquillity, and in turn based on dwelling in empty places without neglecting the practice of meditation (MN I 33 and AN V 131).

The growth of insight gradually removes sensual desire. Those who by mindfully meditating with calm and discerning mind properly see the teaching with insight are no longer interested in sensuality (It 39). Once sensuality has been left behind, the growth of dispassion as a net result of deepening insight will also affect one's attitude to the meditative experience itself. Thus even a sublime experience like the sphere of noth-

ingness, possible only after having developed profound levels of concentration, will simply be seen from the perspective that any "enchantment is a fetter, directly knowing it like this, he thus sees it with insight" (Sn 1115).

The need to beware of attachment does, however, not imply that the development of insight has to be a dreary and distressful experience. Rather, genuine insight will sooner or later be accompanied by joy and delight. As a verse in the *Dhammapada* proclaims:

"Secluded in an empty place,
a monk with calm mind
experiences delight beyond [that of ordinary] humans
on rightly seeing the teaching with insight" (Dhp 373).

Needless to say, the same applies certainly also to nuns as well as male and female lay practitioners. In fact, the term "monk" in its usage in the early discourse often functions as an appellative that covers all disciples, instead of singling out male monastics alone.

Though the development of insight will at times involve the experience of sadness and even fear, in the long run the joy of letting go and the delight of inner purity and freedom are bound to manifest. For one who experiences such letting go and inner purity, according to the *Theragāthā*,

"There is no comparable delight,
[even from] five-fold music,
as when with a concentrated mind
one rightly sees the teaching with insight" (Th 398).

An extended simile in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* describes the situation of a man who has plunged into water and might either drown or else emerge again (AN IV 11). In the context of this imagery, the one who emerges and is able to firmly remain above water and see with insight, *vipassati*, represents the

stream-enterer. In fact, with this level of awakening true insight has ‘emerged’ to such a degree as to become firmly established.

Further deepening of insight then issues in full awakening, hence to be one who "sees with insight and knows" is one of the epithets of a Buddha (Sn 349 and Th 1269).

The same quality of being endowed with insight is also reflected in the name of the former Buddha Vipassī. According to the *Mahāpadāna-sutta*, the recently born Vipassī was given this name because he had the habit of looking without blinking his eyes (DN II 20). As a young boy in the hall of justice, he showed his ability to investigate thoroughly, thereby proving that he truly deserved his name (DN II 21). In this way, the *Mahāpadāna-sutta* indicates that unwavering attention to a matter at hand and thorough investigation are central qualities associated with the term *vipassanā*.

Another quality associated with the same term is the ability to remain in the present moment. The theme of keeping to the present moment is taken up in a set of verses on how to best spend an "auspicious night", *bhaddekaratta*. According to these verses, one should not go after the past, nor yearn for the future. Instead, spending one’s time in a truly auspicious manner takes place when one sees with insight phenomena as and when they manifest in the present moment (MN III 193). Such seeing with insight here and now is also a key requirement of mindfulness practice, described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*.

7.2 Insight and Mindfulness

A verse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* and in the *Theragāthā* contrasts one who does not see what is "outside" or does not know what is "inside" to one who knows what is "inside" and sees with insight what is "outside" (AN II 71 and Th 472). These

references to outside and inside bring to mind the instructions given in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, which similarly enjoin that mindful contemplation should cover what is "inside" and what is "outside" (MN I 56) . The *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* instructions refer to the implementation of mindfulness with the verb *pajānāti*, he or she "knows", an expression also found in the verse above. This terminological similarity reflects a close relationship between insight and mindfulness practice. Not only such terminological similarities, but also the various modes of putting into practice the establishments of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*) point to the important support that the development of mindfulness can offer to the growth of insight.

Besides mindfulness, however, the discourses offer a variety of perspectives on the development of insight. Notably, several of the above surveyed passages speak of seeing with insight 'the teaching'. Thus a central aspect of *vipassanā* in the early canonical sources is the insightful vision triggered through a particular teaching given by the Buddha.

In fact, in the thought-world of the early discourses the term *vipassanā* stands predominantly for insight as a quality to be developed. This thus differs from the modern day usage, where *vipassanā* often stands representative for a particular form of meditation, usually a specific technique whose practice marks off one insight meditation tradition from another.

The somewhat non-technical approach for the development of the quality of insight depicted in the discourses often involves the use of maxims, sayings or brief instructions. This can be seen on recurrent occasions where a monastic disciple approaches the Buddha and requests instructions for solitary intensive practice. The teachings given in reply could be, for example: "by clinging one is bound by Māra" (SN III 73). Or else a description of the arising of delight in relation to any sense door is followed by the conclusion that "from the arising

of [such] delight [comes] the arising of *dukkha*" (SN IV 37). Often enough such instructions, on being put into practice, lead to the attainment of full liberation.

This goes to show that the teachings given by the Buddha play a crucial role in the development of insight. Yet, this certainly does not mean that insight is a matter of intellectual reflection. Quite to the contrary, in fact, "there is no wisdom without meditating" (Dhp 372). But the teachings play an all-important role as a catalyst for the development of insight through meditation.

Awareness of this catalyst function makes it clear why the practice of any modern day '*vipassanā*' technique is best paired with knowledge of and timely reflection on the *Dhamma*, in order for its awakening potential to be able to unfold. To use a modern simile, the dough of meditation practice, kneaded with energy and then placed into the warmth of concentration, needs the yeast of the teachings in order to grow into the bread of insight.

Since want of space makes an exhaustive survey of canonical passages related to the development of insight impossible, in what follows I will provide practical examples for the development of insight by surveying the mindfulness practices described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, without thereby intending to confine insight to mindfulness practice.

According to a discourse in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya*, contemplating arising and passing away is of such importance for the development of mindfulness that it marks the difference between mere *satipaṭṭhāna* and its "development", *satipaṭṭhāna-bhāvanā* (SN V 183). The same mode of contemplation is also highlighted in a passage that is repeated in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* after each of the individual exercises. This passage indicates that mindful contemplation, besides needing to be undertaken in a comprehensive manner by covering what is "inside"

as well as what is "outside", requires observing the arising and the passing away of the contemplated phenomena (MN I 56).

Such directing of mindfulness to arising and passing away ties in well with the importance of penetrative awareness of impermanence for the development of insight and wisdom, mentioned above. The detachment and equanimity that result from such contemplation are also reflected in this passage in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, according to which during contemplation undertaken properly one dwells independently, without clinging to anything.

Besides these key recommendations, the individual exercises listed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* offer different approaches for the gaining of liberating insight. The four areas for the growth of insight through the deployment of mindfulness cover the body, feelings, mental states and phenomena. In regard to the body, the exercises recommended are:

– mindfulness of breathing,
– awareness of bodily postures,
– clear comprehension during bodily activities,
– reviewing the anatomical constitution of the body,
– contemplating the body as constituted of the four elements,
– recollecting the stages of decay of a corpse.

The first of these exercises, mindfulness of breathing, brings home the impermanent and dependent nature of every moment of bodily existence, as one's very survival depends entirely on the next breath. In fact, two discourses in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* recommend practising recollection of death by directing awareness to the uncertainty of being able to live even until the next breath (AN III 306 and AN IV 319).

The next two exercises direct mindfulness to bodily postures and activities. A discourse in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* describes how a worldling's mistaken notion of a self is intrinsically re-

lated to his or her performance of the four bodily postures (SN III 151). This suggests insight into not-self to be a potential insight that can be gained through mindfulness of one's bodily postures.

Contemplation of the anatomical constitution of the body can lead to insight into the vanity of the idea of bodily beauty, offering a strong antidote to sensual desire. According to another discourse this contemplation constitutes the method for arousing the "perception of unattractiveness", *asubhasaññā* (AN V 109), whose purpose other discourses indicate to be the overcoming of sensual desire (AN III 323; cf. also AN IV 47 and It 80). Another benefit of contemplating the unattractive nature of the body is its potential to counter conceit, a potential revealed in a passage where this exercise is recommended to monks who are being excessively honoured and venerated (MN I 336).

Contemplation of the body from the perspective of the four elements again points to insight into not-self, an insight alluded to in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* itself with the simile of a butcher who cuts up a cow into pieces for sale (MN I 58). What formerly was 'a cow' has now lost its apparent compactness and is reduced to mere 'pieces of beef'. Similarly, what formerly was 'my body' can with growing insight be seen as simply a conglomeration of the four elements. Another discourse highlights as a distinct quality of arahants that they know the elements to be entirely devoid of a self. By dint of such insight, they have gone beyond any clinging in relation to these elements (MN III 31).

A complementary aspect of the same contemplation would be insight into impermanence. This is reflected in the *Mahā-hatthipadopama-sutta*. The discourse reasons that, given that due to cosmic cycles of destruction even the earth itself will eventually disappear, what to say of the impermanent nature of

this body, made up of the same elements as the earth (MN I 185)?

The final exercise described under contemplation of the body reviews stages of decay of a corpse in a charnel ground, where the task of mindfulness is to keep in mind that one's own body is bound to undergo a similar fate. An insight to be gained from such contemplation is detachment in regard to the idea of bodily beauty. This potential is reflected in a passage that employs the stages of decay as a way of bringing out the inherent disadvantage of a physical body, however beautiful it may have been earlier (MN I 88).

Verses in the *Theragāthā* document the actual undertaking of contemplation of a corpse and its potential of leading to liberating insight (Th 315-319, see also Th 393-398). A discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* mentions the removal of conceit as yet another benefit to be expected from this exercise (AN III 324).

Another self-evident effect of contemplating a corpse in decay would be awareness of mortality. Death is fearful to the extent to which we identify with our body. Thus one who has insight into the impermanent nature of the body will gradually become able to dwell free from fear (Th 1093).

The next chief subject of *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation are feelings, whose crucial position as the condition for craving in the context of dependent arising makes their mindful contemplation a central ground for the arousing of insight. The task of insight here is to realize the degree to which the affective tone of feelings – be it pleasant, painful or neutral – conditions one's attitude and reactions to what is experienced.

The instructions further distinguish the three basic types of feeling into worldly and unworldly types, *sāmisa* and *nirāmisa*, thereby drawing attention to the possible activation of the underlying tendencies to passion, aversion and ignorance

through worldly types of feelings that are pleasant, painful or neutral (SN IV 205).

Another prominent insight perspective engendered through contemplation of feelings is impermanence. One who has reached full liberation will experience any type of feeling as something impermanent that is felt with complete detachment (MN III 244). The constantly changing nature of feelings also reveals the characteristic of not-self, making it impossible to either posit feeling as a self or else assume that it is the self that feels (DN II 67).

Insight into impermanence and not-self continue to be central themes in the next establishment of mindfulness, concerned with states of mind. The mental states listed for mindful contemplation are presented in pairs of opposites, thereby inculcating in the practitioner the ability to clearly distinguish between what should be avoided and what should be developed.

A central purpose of contemplation of states of mind is to arouse awareness of their conditioning role on verbal and bodily activities, whose wholesome or unwholesome nature depends on the quality of the mind that has been their forerunner.

An analytical perspective on mental states becomes evident in the *Anupāda-sutta*'s description of Sāriputta's practice of insight in regard to things as they occur (MN III 25). His development of insight took place through an analysis of the mental states experienced during an absorption or immaterial attainment into their mental constituents, followed by contemplating their arising and passing away while at the same time maintaining detachment.

The same analytical perspective is turned on deeper experiences of concentration in the *Aṭṭhakanāgara-sutta*, which indicates that seeing an absorption or immaterial attainment as merely a conditioned product of the mind will yield such pene-

trative insight that either non-return or full awakening can be expected (MN I 350).

Contemplation of phenomena (*dhamma*s) covers the following topics:

- the five hindrances,
- the five aggregates [affected by] clinging,
- the six sense-spheres,
- the seven awakening factors,
- the four noble truths.

Two related forms of practice from this area of mindfulness meditation practice are the first and the fourth contemplation, which are concerned with the five hindrances and the seven factors of awakening. The insight to be developed here is closely related to meditation practice itself, as one should be able to clearly recognize these states, as well as the conditions responsible for their coming into being and for their removal (in the case of the hindrances) or for their further development (in the case of the awakening factors). The point behind this instruction is to foster quick recognition and the taking of appropriate measures during actual practice.

Another two related contemplations analyse personal experience from the perspective of the five aggregates and the six sense-spheres. Insight into the impermanent nature of the five aggregates [affected by] clinging features in other discourses as a particularly prominent cause for the break-through to liberation (DN II 35; DN III 223; SN II 29; SN II 253; AN II 45 and AN IV 153). The reasons for this potential are not hard to find, as insight into the impermanent nature of what is clung to as ‘I’ and ‘mine’ erodes the very foundation of clinging.

In the case of the sense-spheres, mindfulness should explore the fettering force of experiences that arise based on the senses and their objects. Mindfulness developed in this way reveals

the degree to which the binding influence of the six sense-spheres is the central condition for involvement in and reaction to the world. In fact the 'world' of experience arises just due to these six and is afflicted because of clinging to them (Sn 169).

In the case of the sense-spheres, too, impermanence is another insight to be developed, as knowing and seeing the impermanent nature of the sense-spheres will lead to the attainment of stream-entry (SN III 225), if not higher.

The culmination of the exercises listed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, and at the same time the culmination of the growth of insight, are the four noble truths. The supreme importance of insight into the four noble truths, which equals full insight into the dependent arising of *dukkha* and its cessation, is reflected in the circumstance that such insight features regularly in descriptions of the attainment of stream-entry during a gradual discourse given by the Buddha (e.g. MN I 380), as well as in records of the break-through to full awakening (e.g. MN I 23).

The *Dhammacakkapavattana-sutta* delineates the actual tasks required for true insight into the four noble truths, indicating that the first truth needs to be fully understood, the second to be abandoned, the third to be realized and the fourth to be developed (SN V 422; see also SN V 436).

Other discourses that take up the same four activities indicate that what needs to be fully understood are the five aggregates [affected by] clinging, what needs to be abandoned are ignorance and craving for existence, what needs to be realized are knowledge and liberation, and what needs to be developed are tranquillity and insight (MN III 289; SN V 52; AN II 247). This is indeed the gist of the practice.

7.3 The Insight Knowledges

A systematic survey of the key experience to be encountered during the progress of insight meditation is not provided in the early discourses, but is only found in later literature. Since the indications given in this later scheme of insight knowledges are of considerable practical importance, in what follows I will depart from my general approach of focussing only on the early discourses and survey this scheme, followed by relating it to relevant passages in the discourses.

A treatment of the development of insight, given in the *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha* (Bodhi 1993: 346), lists ten such insight knowledges. Other listings count more knowledges, as they also cover stages that precede these ten insight knowledges: "knowledge of delimitating name-and-form" and "knowledge of discerning conditions", (*nāmarūpaparicchedañāṇa* and *paccayapariggahañāṇa*).

Moreover, once the experience of the ten insight knowledges leads to stream-entry, "change-of-lineage" from worldling to a noble person takes place and the "path" as well as the "fruit" of stream-entry are experienced, followed by "reviewing". Hence another four knowledges can be designated (*gotrabhūñāṇa, maggañāṇa, phalañāṇa* and *paccavekkhaṇañāṇa*), resulting in an overall account of sixteen knowledges.

The two preliminary knowledges, "knowledge of delimitating name-and-form" and "knowledge of discerning conditions", can be understood to clear the ground for the development of insight (see Vism 587-605). Their purpose is to reveal the insubstantiality of all aspects of personal existence by analysing body and mind into their component parts, and by revealing the conditioned interrelation of these component parts. Based on having discerned mind and matter as distinct but interrelated phenomena, the series of ten insight knowledges sets in. These ten knowledges comprise:

– comprehension (*sammasanañāṇa*),
– rise and fall (*udayabbayañāṇa*),
– dissolution (*bhaṅgañāṇa*),
– fearfulness (*bhayañāṇa*),
– disadvantageousness (*ādīnavañāṇa*),
– disenchantment (*nibbidāñāṇa*),
– desire for deliverance (*muñcitukamyatāñāṇa*),
– reflection (*paṭisaṅkhāñāṇa*),
– equanimity towards formations (*saṅkhārupekkhāñāṇa*),
– conformity (*anulomañāṇa*).

Knowledge of comprehension refers to contemplating the three characteristics. This then leads on to contemplating in particular the characteristic of impermanence in terms of rise and fall. At this junction of progress, experiences can arise that are "imperfections of insight" (see in detail Paṭis II 101 and Vism 633). Such imperfections (*upakkilesa*) of insight could involve the experience of, for example, deep tranquillity, or penetrative insight, or firm equanimity. Though being signs of progress, these experiences could be attached to and mistakenly grasped as attainments in themselves. Detached progress instead leads to a maturing of the penetrative experience of the continuous arising and passing away of all aspects of body and mind. This eventually culminates in an experience of total dissolution, wherein the disappearance aspect of all phenomena becomes particularly prominent.

At this stage, when the entire meditative experience is marked with constant dissolution and disintegration, fear arises. Such fear manifests because the very foundation of what is taken to be ‘I’ and ‘mine’, whether this be explicitly as a rationalized self-notion or only implicitly as a sub-conscious feeling of identity that lurks at the background of all experience, is experienced as unstable, as breaking down and disintegrating at every moment.

If mental balance can be maintained, the inherent disadvantage of all phenomena becomes evident, the whole world of experience loose all its attraction and an all pervasive sense of disenchantment sets in. Such disenchantment then expresses itself in desire for deliverance.

At this stage of practice, insight into the three characteristics of reality becomes markedly clear with knowledge of reflection, which is similar in type to the earlier knowledge of comprehension, but differing from the latter in intensity and clarity. Knowledge of reflection gains its momentum from having passed through the previous insight experiences, in particular through the experiences of dissolution, fear and disenchantment.

Eventually a profound sense of equanimity sets in, with which the not-self nature of reality becomes evident with outstanding clarity. Meditation practice continues effortlessly at this point, the mind is concentrated and well balanced. Full maturity of the development of insight comes with knowledge of conformity, which heralds the break-through to the supramundane experience.

At this point the series of ten insight knowledges has reached its completion point. The mind momentarily withdraws from externals, with which the practitioner leaves the stage of being a worldling. Immediately thereon follow the experience of the path and fruition moment, being equivalent to liberating insight into the four noble truths through realization of the third truth, realization of *Nibbāna*. On emerging from the experience of the supramundane, the mind naturally looks back on the extraordinary experience that has just happened and reviews what has taken place.

The basic dynamics that stand behind these ten knowledges could be reduced to the three characteristics, in that direct confrontation with the characteristic of impermanence (*udayab-*

bayañāṇa and *bhaṅgañāṇa*) leads to insight into *dukkha*, which proceeds from the onset of fear via seeing disadvantage and developing disenchantment to arousing the desire for deliverance (*bhayañāṇa*, *ādīnavāñāṇa*, *nibbidāñāṇa* and *muñcitukamyatāñāṇa*).

With the maturity of the affective transformation brought about through this deepening appreciation of *dukkha*, the characteristic of not-self becomes increasingly evident (*paṭisaṅkhāñāṇa*, *saṅkhārupekkhāñāṇa* and *anulomañāṇa*). This insight will become a matter of full and direct experience with the breakthrough to stream-entry, wherein any sense of selfhood completely disappears.

Considered from this perspective, the series of ten insight knowledges can be understood to express in a more detailed manner the basic dynamics of insight already mentioned above, which proceeds from perception of impermanence, via perception of *dukkha* in what is impermanent, to perception of not-self in what is *dukkha*.

Several of the individual stages of the insight knowledges can also be seen to take their inspiration from the early discourses. Thus a passage in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* speaks of developing "internal comprehension" through "comprehending" (SN II 107), a comprehension that stands for reflecting on the dependent arising of *dukkha* through craving. This would involve a similar insight as that envisaged by the initial insight knowledge of comprehension.

A verse in the *Dhammapada* then enjoins the meditator to "comprehend" the "rise and fall" of the aggregates in order to come to know the deathless (Dhp 374), thereby providing a lead over from the first to the second insight knowledge.

The reference in the third insight knowledge to dissolution, *bhaṅga*, can be understood to be but a different term for *khaya*

or *vaya*, "destruction" and "decay", which in the discourses frequently highlight the disappearing aspect of phenomena. Both terms occur in an explanation of why all felt experience is unsatisfactory (SN IV 216), thus providing a lead over to the theme of *dukkha* which is so prominent in the insight knowledges that follow after knowledge of dissolution.

The theme of fear occurs in a discourse in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya*, which describes how long-lived *deva*s become terrified when they realize that their existence is impermanent and unstable (SN III 85 and AN II 33). A simile in another discourse in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* compares the four elements to poisonous snakes, the five aggregates to murderers, and the objects of the senses to a gang of robbers. These images bring out the frightful nature of these aspects of experience, once their potential to lead to attachment is seen with the clarity of insight (SN IV 174).

The qualification "disadvantageous" frequently occurs in the discourses as part of a treatment of phenomena from the three perspectives of their advantage, *assāda*, their disadvantage, *ādīnava*, and the escape from them, *nissaraṇa* (e.g. MN I 85-90). Insight into the inherent disadvantage of the five aggregates then leads to developing disenchantment, *nibbidā*, towards them (SN III 62).

The relation between seeing the inherent disadvantage of phenomena and having the desire for liberation comes to the fore in the Buddha's autobiographical account of his own striving for awakening. According to this account, on seeing the disadvantage in what is subject to decay he set out in search for *Nibbāna* (MN I 167). Hence these passages would correspond to the pattern of the insight knowledges that leads from awareness of disadvantageousness to disenchantment and desire for deliverance.

The *Sabbāsava-sutta* relates the idea of reflection to developing the seven factors of awakening in such a way that they are based on seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, culminating in letting go (MN I 11). In the discourses, this mode of development of the factors of awakening usually designates a stage of practice that issues in realization and would thus be reflecting a similar level of development as knowledge of reflection.

Though the term *saṅkhārupekkhā* itself does not appear in the discourses, the same idea could be seen in the depiction of the progress towards the seventh awakening factor given in the *Ānāpānasati-sutta*. According to this discourse, by looking on with equanimity at the concentrated mind the awakening factor of equanimity arises (MN III 86).

The *Visuddhimagga* illustrates *saṅkhārupekkhāñāṇa* with the help of a simile found in the *Devadaha-sutta* (Vism 656). This simile describes a man who formerly suffered on seeing the woman he loves conversing and laughing with another man. Once he has overcome his affection for the woman, however, he is no longer affected by her behaviour. In the *Devadaha-sutta*, this simile indeed illustrates the development of equanimity (MN II 223).

The idea of conformity makes its appearance in a context related to the attainment of realization as "conformity of patience". In this context, conformity stands for the result of having developed insight into the three characteristics, leading to the attainment of the four stages of awakening (AN III 441).

Hence even though the systematisation of the progress of insight in terms of ten insight knowledges is clearly a later development, its basic dynamics as well as individual components of this scheme have their source in the early discourses.

The circumstance that the early discourses do not provide such a precise scheme is perhaps not without significance, as

there is a danger of such descriptions becoming prescriptions, in the sense of the theoretical model creating expectations in a meditator and thereby interfering with the natural unfolding of meditative insight.

Genuine experience of the insight knowledges is bound to evolve in an individual manner and will never precisely match the theoretical model. Hence the important indications on the basic pattern underlying the progress of insight provided in the scheme of the insight knowledge are best made use of in a manner that itself reflects growing insight: without clinging to anything.

"One who meditates continuously,
endowed with subtle view and insight,
delighting in the destruction of clinging,
him they call 'a true person'"
(SN II 232; It 74 and Th 1012).



8. Tranquillity & Insight / *Samatha & Vipassanā*

Tranquillity (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) are two complementary aspects of early Buddhist meditation practice. As already mentioned at the outset of the previous chapter, *vipassanā* stands for a form of vision that "sees", *passati*, in an "intensified" and also "analytical" manner, and thus represents the development of "insight".

In an occurrence outside of a meditative context, the term *samatha* stands for the "settling" of legal questions, *adhikaraṇa samatha* (Vin IV 207). In the context of meditation, to develop *samatha* similarly requires 'settling' the mind, in the sense of making it 'steady', 'quiet', 'unified' and 'concentrated' (AN II 94).

8.1 The Cooperation between Tranquillity and Insight

While the practice of insight has the purpose of leading to the destruction of ignorance, the practice of tranquillity is specifically aimed at the destruction of passion (AN I 61). This, however, would not imply that these two aspects of meditation represent two different paths leading to two different goals. Another passage explains that for the sake of eradicating passion and a whole host of mental defilements both tranquillity and insight are required (AN I 100). Thus the above distinction only intends to draw attention to the specific task or quality of these two interdependent aspects of early Buddhist meditation practice.

The basic difference between tranquillity and insight can be illustrated with the help of mindfulness of breathing, since this meditation practice can be developed in both modes. The difference here depends on what angle is taken when observing the breath, since emphasis on various phenomena related to the process of breathing stays in the realm of variegated sensory experience and thus is more geared towards the development of insight, while emphasis on just mentally knowing the presence of the breath leads to a unitary type of experience and is thus capable of producing deeper levels of tranquillity.

The development of tranquillity leads to a high degree of mastery over the mind and thereby forms a basis for the development of insight. Insight that is developed by a calm and steady mind will be able to penetrate into the deeper regions of the mind and thereby bring about true inner change.

In addition to its supportive function in relation to insight, the development of tranquillity also has benefits on its own. The experience of deeper stages of tranquillity is one of intense pleasure and happiness, brought about by purely mental means, which thereby automatically eclipses any pleasure arising in dependence on material objects. In this way, the development of tranquillity can become a powerful antidote for sensual desires, by divesting them of their former attraction (e.g. MN I 91; MN I 504; AN III 207 and AN IV 411).

The path leading to the unconditioned requires both tranquillity and insight (SN IV 359). Both are to be developed by higher knowledge as integral parts of the noble eightfold path (MN III 289; SN V 52 and AN II 247). In fact, in the discourses the terms tranquillity and insight usually occur together. This is so much the case that the two are at times simply coupled with each other as essential aspects of the Buddha's teaching (DN III 213 and AN I 95), conveying the impression that they are just the two sides of one coin.

The close relationship between tranquillity and insight is also evident in a survey of various aspects of the early Buddhist path of practice as the way to the unconditioned. This survey mentions tranquillity and insight as one category and alternatively lists such categories as the four right efforts, the seven factors of awakening, or the noble eightfold path (SN IV 360). What emerges from such listings is that, from the perspective of the early discourses, tranquillity and insight are two qualities that necessarily operate in conjunction.

The same principle finds a fitting illustration in a simile, according to which tranquillity and insight are a "pair of messengers" whose task it to carry the message of *Nibbāna* along the road of the noble eightfold path (SN IV 195). Both tranquillity and insight are required for progress from right view to full liberation (MN I 294 and AN III 21); hence for further progress both are recommended to a disciple in higher training (MN I 494). A whole range of defilements can be overcome by developing both (AN I 100); hence tranquillity and insight are of such importance that one should make a determined effort in regard to both (MN III 297).

The need to develop both tranquillity and insight is taken up in more detail in a discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, which describes four types of practitioners, distinguished according to whether they have been able to gain:

- internal tranquillity of the mind,
- higher wisdom through insight into phenomena,
- neither of the two,
- both.

According to this discourse, in case only one of the two or even none of them has been developed, one should search for counsel and instructions on how to develop the lacking quality. In its description of the inquiry that someone who lacks one or both puts to an experienced practitioner for guidance, this dis-

course indicates that "internal tranquillity of the mind" stands for being able to concentrate the mind. "Higher wisdom through insight into phenomena" requires knowing how formations (*saṅkhāra*s) should be regarded, comprehended and seen with insight (AN II 94).

Besides providing a definition of tranquillity and insight, this discourse again underlines that both need to be developed for progress towards the destruction of the influxes. The predicament of one who lacks both is comparable to someone whose head is on fire (AN V 99), that is, something needs to be done immediately. Lacking only higher wisdom through insight into phenomena is still as detrimental as the predicament of a four-footed animal that has one of its legs crippled (AN IV 360).

A calm mind supports the development of insight and the presence of insight in turn facilitates the development of deeper levels of calmness (Dhp 372). Therefore tranquillity and insight are at their best when developed in skilful co-operation. Viewed from this perspective, to speak of tranquillity and insight is less a matter of distinguishing between two separate systems of meditation than of highlighting two central qualities that are to be developed in conjunction with any type of meditation practice.

8.2 The Sequence of Practising Tranquillity and Insight

Though there is a time for the practice of tranquillity and there is a time for developing insight, only by developing both at the proper time, together with hearing the teachings and discussing them, will gradually lead to the destruction of the influxes (AN II 140). Once both have been developed, progress becomes natural, comparable to rainwater that fills the rivulets and rivers and gradually reaches the ocean.

According to the *Yuganaddha-sutta* (AN II 157), progress to awakening can take place in the following manner:

- insight preceded by tranquillity,
- tranquillity preceded by insight,
- tranquillity and insight conjoined,
- (overcoming) restlessness in regard to the teachings.

Each of these four modes leads to the experience of the path. Further development and practice of this path then brings about the removal of the fetters and underlying tendencies. According to the introduction to the discourse, all those, who declared their successful attainment of final liberation in the presence of Ānanda, did so after having followed one or the other of these four approaches.

The first two of these four approaches are self-evident, in that either tranquillity or else insight is developed first, followed by the other. Notably, both modes are presented side by side without any indication that one of them is to be preferred over the other.

The notion of tranquillity and insight practiced in conjunction recurs in the *Mahāsaḷāyatana-sutta*. This discourse describes the development of insight in regard to sense experience, which then leads to developing the eightfold noble path and other qualities conducive to awakening. Practising in this way, according to the *Mahāsaḷāyatana-sutta* tranquillity and insight proceed in conjunction (MN III 289).

Examples for the fourth mode of arriving at stream-entry, described in the *Yuganaddha-sutta*, could be those occasions when someone attains stream-entry during a discourse given by the Buddha. In several such instances, as for example in the case of the stream-entry of the leper and beggar Suppabuddha (Ud 49) or even of hired killers that had the mission to murder the Buddha (Vin II 192), it can safely be assumed that the per-

sons in question had not previously engaged in the systematic meditative development of tranquillity or insight.

The standard descriptions of stream-entry during a gradual discourse given by the Buddha regularly indicate that the mind of the listener is free from the hindrances (e.g. MN I 380). Such instances may well fit the fourth case envisaged in the *Yuganaddha-sutta*, in the sense that the Buddha's skill at exposition was such that he could bring about what otherwise can only be achieved through the systematic development of tranquillity and insight: a balanced state of mind that is able to break through to stream-entry due to having overcome the hindrances (and in particular any restlessness related to the *Dhamma*) while hearing a penetrative exposition given by the Buddha.

Whatever may be the final word on the implications of the final two approaches described in the *Yuganaddha-sutta*, there can be no doubt that the point made in this discourse is that tranquillity and insight can be combined in various ways and there seems to be no need to assume that one must invariably precede the other.

At the same time, however, it is quite evident that this discourse does not envisage an approach to awakening that relies on only one of these two, practiced at the cost of excluding the other. Moreover, once stream-entry has been attained, both are needed for further progress (MN I 294).

This provides an important perspective on the practice of tranquillity and its relation to the development of insight. The *Yuganaddha-sutta* indicates that tranquillity neither leads on its own to awakening, nor is it an absolute requisite that needs to be developed up to a certain degree before undertaking the development of insight, nor can its development be completely neglected for the sake of insight.

That is, the development of tranquillity is a necessary companion to the development of insight, but the way in which this companion is related to the practice of insight is up to individual choice.

Monoculture, however, should definitely be avoided, in order to ensure that tranquillity and insight perform their purpose of leading to liberation.



9. Concentration / *Samādhi*

Samādhi represents a mental quality or a state of mind that is quite literally "put together" or "collected" (*saṃ* + *ā* + *dhā*). My examination of this important ability to collect the mind begins with an initial survey of various types of *samādhi*, followed by covering the following themes: aspects of the gradual path of training in their relation to gaining concentration, the development and nature of absorption, supernormal abilities to be acquired through proficiency in *samādhi*, and the relationship between concentration and awakening.

In the Pāli discourses, the term *samādhi* occurs in a variety of contexts, covering not only the realm of tranquillity proper, but also the development of insight. Thus *samādhi* can refer to the practice of walking meditation (AN III 30), or to contemplating the arising and passing away of the five aggregates (AN II 45). A passage from the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* treats even the four establishments of mindfulness as a form of *samādhi* (AN IV 300).

The breadth of meaning of the term *samādhi* becomes also evident in the fact that the discourses distinguish between various types of concentration. Thus the *Saṅgīti-sutta* (DN III 222) differentiates between *samādhi* that leads to a pleasant abiding by attaining absorption; *samādhi* that leads to knowledge and vision by developing the perception of light or clarity (*āloka-saññā*); *samādhi* that leads to mindfulness and clear comprehension by contemplating the arising and passing away of feelings, perceptions, and thoughts; and *samādhi* that leads to the

destruction of the influxes by contemplating the arising and passing away of the five aggregates.

The same *Saṅgīti-sutta* (DN III 219) presents another set of three *samādhi*s by distinguishing between concentration that is empty, signless, or undirected. Out of these three types of *samādhi*, the signless concentration occurs frequently in the discourses on its own. To develop such signless concentration is to direct attention away from any possible 'sign' (MN I 298). In the present context, 'sign' stands for those aspects or marks of phenomena with the help of which one is able to recognize an object.

The *Saṅgīti-sutta* (DN III 219) has still another threefold distinction of *samādhi* to offer, which lists concentration with initial and sustained application of the mind, without initial but still with sustained application of the mind, and finally without both (see also DN III 274; MN III 162; SN IV 360; SN IV 363 and AN IV 300). The first of these represents levels of concentration up to and including the first absorption and the last the other three absorptions, while concentration without initial but still with sustained application of the mind occupies a position between the first and the second absorption (see in more detail below).

The *Dasuttara-sutta* presents another set of four types of concentration by distinguishing between concentration that is conducive to decline, to stability, to distinction and to penetration (DN III 277). Another set of four *samādhi*s forms part of the standard presentations of the four roads to supernormal power (*iddhipāda*) in the discourses (SN V 268). These four roads to supernormal power differ due to the mode of concentration employed in each case. Such concentration can be based upon wholesome forms of desire, upon energy, upon inclining the mind, and upon investigation.

The notion of "power" underlying these four roads to supernormal power points to one of the manifold benefits of deeper levels of *samādhi*, namely the possibility to develop supernormal powers. Before, however, turning to such possible fruits of *samādhi*, first the factors required for its development need to be surveyed. These factors can conveniently be covered by examining central aspects of the gradual path of training, whose dynamics are closely related to the development of *samādhi*.

9.1 The Development of Concentration

The foundation for any mental culture is morality, and its relevance for *samādhi* finds expression in a standard qualification of moral conduct as being "conducive to concentration" (e.g. MN I 322). The development of morality covers also the area of speech, where friendly forms of communication are expressly related to concentration, since harsh speech is "not conducive to concentration" (MN I 286). Not only harsh speech, but also quarrelsome speech will obstruct the gain of concentration (AN IV 87).

An important aspect of the gradual path of training is restraint of the sense-doors, a practice especially aimed at overcoming sensory distraction. This constitutes an important condition for the development of concentration. Only once the compulsion of infatuation with the senses has become weakened will the mind be able to settle within and gain concentration.

Another step in the gradual path of training is contentment, particularly significant in the present context since one who is not content with external circumstances will not be able to gain concentration (Dhp 249). Contentment is in fact a key factor for the development of mental tranquillity, with a potential for leading to a deepening of concentration that can hardly be overestimated.

Consistent precedence given to the development of contentment during all activities as well as when settling down for formal meditation goes a long way in preparing the ground for what is, in a way, the direct result of contentment: a mind that is happily settled within and therefore able to gain deep concentration.

A related feature is moderation in regard to food, given that overeating will cause drowsiness and thereby obstruct concentration (SN V 64). During intensified practice in seclusion or under retreat conditions, food can easily become the last available arena for sensual distraction. Yet, giving in to the type of sensual pleasure available through food is diametrically opposed to the form of happiness that can be gained within, once concentration deepens.

When these basics have been put into practice successfully, the gradual path of training moves into those areas of the noble eightfold path that belong to the category of the aggregate of concentration proper. This aggregate of concentration comprises, besides right concentration itself, right effort and right mindfulness.

The *Cūḷavedalla-sutta* (MN I 301) clarifies that concentration requires the development of the four right efforts, which are its "requisites". The same holds for right mindfulness in form of the four establishments of mindfulness, which are the "signs" (*nimitta*) of concentration. The close relationship between mindfulness and concentration can also be inferred from a statement by Anuruddha (SN V 298), in which he attributes his outstanding concentrative abilities to his practice of the establishments of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*).

In the context of the gradual path of training, right effort finds its expression in the practice of wakefulness. According to the standard descriptions, wakefulness stands for purifying

the mind from obstructive states, indeed a necessary condition for being able to gain *samādhi*.

Concomitant with such overcoming of obstructive states is the cultivation of mindfulness, exemplified in the gradual path scheme through the development of clear comprehension in regard to any bodily activity. Out of the various bodily activities to be conducted with mindfulness, the walking posture is particularly capable of leading to a stable form of concentration (AN III 30)

Once the mind is endowed with wakefulness and mindfulness, the five hindrances can be overcome. The mental collectedness and composure of concentration one may experience reflects the degree to which these hindrances have been overcome, as their presence tends to scatter and agitate the mind. When they are left behind, delight and joy arise, followed by tranquillity and happiness, four factors whose arising naturally leads to a deepening of concentration (cf. e.g. DN I 73).

For the purpose of overcoming the five hindrances and developing deeper levels of concentration, the discourses often recommend withdrawal into seclusion. The standard descriptions of the type of environment conducive to the development of concentration recommend places such as the root of a tree or an empty place.

The relationship between seclusion and concentration is reciprocal, since not only does seclusion facilitate concentration, but one who is bereft of concentration will also not be able to benefit from living in seclusion (AN V 202), or even find delight in a secluded life-style.

Physical seclusion thus has its complement in mental seclusion through removal of the hindrances. Here the *Upakkilesa-sutta* (MN III 158) offers a helpful survey of mental obstructions that could prevent the deepening of concentration. The

obstructions (*upakkilesa*) mentioned in this discourse are a set not encountered elsewhere in the discourses, being specifically related to the development of deeper concentration. The mental obstructions listed are doubt, inattention, sloth-and-torpor, consternation, elation, unease, excessive energy, deficient energy, longing, diversified perceptions and excessive meditation on forms.

A closer examination of this list reveals that this set of mental obstructions incorporates various manifestations of the last three hindrances. This indicates that, even before attempting to develop concentration, the first two hindrances of sensual desire and ill-will have to be removed. Overcoming the remaining three hindrances is what then leads to a gradual deepening of concentration, until the first absorption can be experienced.

Another noteworthy aspect of the *Upakkilesa-sutta* is its reference to the "sign", *nimitta.* According to the *Upakkilesa-sutta*, Anuruddha and his companions told the Buddha that they saw meditative lights and forms, but these soon disappeared. In reply, the Buddha explained that they should "penetrate that sign" (MN III 157). The use of the expression "sign" in the present context is to some extent ambiguous, as it could have a plain causal sense, simply indicating that they should understand the cause for the disappearance of their meditative visions.

Alternatively, *nimitta* can also stand for a "sign" in the sense of the characteristics with the help of which perception recognizes an object. To understand *nimitta* in the sense of a meditative sign would also fit the present context, which treats meditative visions and the development of concentration. In fact, at a later point the *Upakkilesa-sutta* speaks of directing attention to the meditative experience of forms or to that of light in terms of the *rūpanimitta* and the *obhāsanimitta* (MN III 161). This passage explicitly uses the term *nimitta* to refer to the vi-

sion of light and forms that Anuruddha and his companions had been unable to stabilize, a usage where *nimitta* unequivocally stands for something that is perceived.

From this it seems that the *Upakkilesa-sutta* could indeed be describing the development of the mental *nimitta* required in order to enter the first absorption. This interpretation would also fit with the mental imperfections listed in the *Upakkilesa-sutta*, which, as already mentioned above, do not cover the first two of the five hindrances, sensual desire and aversion. Their absence implicitly shows that the meditative development treated in the present discourse sets in at a more advanced stage, when these two comparatively gross mental defilements have already been successfully subdued and a minimal basis of mental tranquillity has been established. It is precisely at this stage, when the gross hindrances of sensual desire and aversion have been overcome and the mind becomes increasingly concentrated, that the *nimitta* in the sense of a mental sign can manifest to the meditator.

The use of the term *nimitta* in a context related to the development of concentration is not unique to the *Upakkilesa-sutta*. Elsewhere the discourses also refer to the "sign of tranquillity", *samathanimitta* (DN III 213; SN V 66; SN V 105), to the "sign of concentration", *samādhinimitta* (DN III 226; DN III 242; DN III 279; MN I 249; MN I 301; MN III 112; AN I 115; AN I 256; AN II 17; AN III 23; AN III 321), and to the "sign of the mind", *cittanimitta* (SN V 151; AN III 423; Th 85). The unique contribution made by the *Upakkilesa-sutta* is that it offers a report of actual practice that involves the *nimitta* in a context geared towards absorption attainment.

9.2 Absorption

The attainment of absorption appears to be in fact the central theme of the *Upakkilesa-sutta*, which indicates that overcom-

ing the above mentioned mental imperfections leads to concentration with initial and sustained application of the mind, then to concentration without the former but with a remainder of the latter, and then to concentration without both.

It is perhaps worthy of note that this alternative mode of reckoning the absorptions, already mentioned above as a threefold reckoning of concentration found in the *Saṅgīti-sutta* and several other discourses, does not imply a substantial difference in regard to actual experience. It only offers a different perspective on the same experience of gradually progressing through deeper stages of concentration.

The mode of presenting such progress in terms of the four absorptions, which in the early discourses is the prevalent way in which the absorptions are treated, emphasizes the affective tone of the different levels of concentration experienced during such development. This more affectively oriented mode of description highlights the experience of:

– rapture and happiness of seclusion (1st absorption),
– rapture and happiness of concentration (2nd absorption),
– happiness devoid of rapture (3rd absorption),
– equanimity (4th absorption).

The threefold presentation instead places emphasis on the role of the mental factors of initial and sustained mental application. This threefold mode presents the deepening of concentration from the perspective of the three stages when both are present, when during an interim stage initial mental application is already absent but sustained mental application is still present, and when finally both are absent:

– initial and sustained mental application (1st absorption)
– sustained mental application
– no mental application (2nd to 4th absorption)

That is, the threefold mode of exposition treats the initial stages of progressively deepening of absorption in more detail, as it accords importance to a stage when initial mental application has already been subdued, but sustained mental application is still present. The more affectively oriented mode of presentation underlying the four absorption scheme does not take this interim stage into account, because it still falls under the category "rapture and happiness of seclusion".

Conversely, the fourfold mode takes up the more advanced stages of progress through different levels of absorption in greater detail, according importance to the affective changes that occur when concentration that is without initial and sustained mental application progressively deepens.

Another significant indication related to the nature of absorption can also be gathered from the *Upakkilesa-sutta.* According to its account, before his awakening the Buddha had to make quite an effort in order to overcome a whole series of obstructions until he was able to attain the first absorption (MN III 157). This suggests the first absorption to be a state of mind reached only after prolonged practice and requiring considerable meditative expertise.

This impression is confirmed by turning to the cases of Anuruddha and Mahāmoggallāna. In the case of each of these two chief disciples the personal intervention of the Buddha was required for them to be able to attain and stabilize the first absorption (MN III 157 and SN IV 263). If Anuruddha and Mahāmoggallāna, who later on were reckoned as outstanding among the Buddha's disciples for their concentrative abilities (AN I 23), had such difficulties, then it can safely be concluded that the first absorption stands for a level of concentration that requires considerable meditative training.

Elsewhere the discourses in fact indicate that during the first absorption it is impossible to speak (SN IV 217), and the hear-

ing of sounds is an obstruction to its attainment (AN V 135). With the first absorption one has gone beyond Māra's vision (MN I 159), having reached the end of the world of the senses (AN IV 430). These passages confirm that the first absorption is indeed a state during which the mind is "absorbed" in deep concentration.

Once the first absorption has been attained, a meditator should develop skill in attaining, in maintaining and in emerging from the attainment (AN IV 34). This much accomplished, the second absorption comes into view, a mental experience qualified in the standard descriptions as being "born" of *samādhi*. This qualification points to the fact that with the attainment of the second absorption the meditator has moved beyond the subtle mental ripple caused by the presence of initial and sustained application of the mind, two factors of the first absorption that need to be left behind in order to gain the second absorption.

Further deepening of concentration leads via overcoming of joy to the third absorption and by gaining perfect equanimity to the fourth absorption, with the attainment of which the acme of the development of concentration has been reached. With the imperturbable (*aneñja*) level of concentration reached in this way, the possibility of gaining the immaterial attainments comes into view, refined mental experiences that employ the concentrative strength gained with the fourth concentration to develop increasingly subtler types of perceptions.

The first of these goes beyond the experience of materiality by developing the perception of boundless space. Turning awareness towards the mind that experiences this boundless space leads to the perception of boundless consciousness. Attending to all-pervading consciousness as something that is literally 'nothing' then paves the way to the third immaterial attainment, while leaving behind even the perception of 'noth-

ingness' culminates in a further deepening of experience, whose subtle nature is such that it neither qualifies for being a form of perception, nor for being devoid of perception.

9.3 Supernormal Abilities

With the experience of the deep levels of concentration gained through the four absorptions not only the common world of experience is left behind, but also potential powers and abilities of the mind can be accessed that go beyond the confines of common experience. The discourses frequently mention a set of six such supernormal knowledges (*abhiññā*), which include various magical powers of transformation, supernormal audition and vision, telepathy and recollection of one's past experiences previous to the present life. The last and supreme of these supernormal knowledges is the destruction of the influxes, and it is in order to develop this particular knowledge that concentration has such a central place in the early Buddhist path scheme.

Besides its chief purpose of leading to awakening, however, the successful development of concentration also forms the basis for attaining other abilities that are "beyond [the power of ordinary] men", *uttarimanussa*. A detailed listing of such states can be found in the *Vinaya* in the context of the fourth rule involving defeat (Vin III 91). According to this rule, a monk who falsely lays claim to any such state beyond the power of ordinary men irrevocably loses his status as a *bhikkhu*.

The fact that falsely claiming supernormal abilities is thus treated on a par with engaging in sex, theft and murder highlights the seriousness of such behaviour. According to the background narration to this regulation, at a time of famine some monks had resorted to such false claims in order to ensure that they would get sufficient alms.

The theme of claims to supernormal abilities comes up again in another *Vinaya* regulation of less grave consequences (Vin IV 25). The background narration to this rule is the same, the only difference being that here the monks who made claims in order to ensure food supplies had indeed attained what they were claiming. Nevertheless, their behaviour was considered blameworthy and censurable.

These *Vinaya* regulations highlight two aspects of supernormal abilities, namely the high esteem that was accorded in ancient India to anyone who could claim or even display some kind of supernormal ability, and the early Buddhist disdain towards making such claims and displays for worldly purposes.

A quite explicit instance of such disdain can be found in the *Kevaddha-sutta*, according to which the householder Kevaddha wanted Buddhist monks to display supernormal abilities and perform extraordinary feats of psychic power in order to convert the inhabitants of Nāḷandā (DN I 211). In reply to this suggestion, according to the *Kevaddha-sutta* the Buddha explained that he would not let his monks make any public display of supernormal abilities, followed by differentiating between three types of extraordinary feats:

- supernormal powers such as multiplying oneself etc.,
- the telepathic ability to read the mind of others,
- instructions on how to train one's own mind.

Of these three, the third is reckoned superior, since instructions on how to develop and liberate the mind will enable others to come to realization by themselves. In this way the *Kevaddha-sutta* indicates that, instead of trying to amaze the multitude with exhibitions of supernormal powers, the way the Buddha wanted his teachings to impress themselves on the public was through the power of instructions that lead to self-realization.

In contrast to such self-realization, according to the *Kevaddha-sutta* the Buddha disapproved, rejected and disdained the other two types of extraordinary feats (DN I 213). Since according to the same *Kevaddha-sutta* the Buddha was himself endowed with all three of these extraordinary feats, the message conveyed by this passage would not be a wholesale rejection of supernormal powers and telepathy as such, but rather of their public display as a means to arouse faith.

The rationale behind this disapproval appears to be that faith based on any external display will always remain a type of faith that can be shaken by others. The third of the three extraordinary feats, discussed in the *Kevaddha-sutta*, leads to a different type of faith or confidence, as it is not based on an external display of the abilities of others, but on having realized within oneself the truth and efficacy of the instructions given by the Buddha. The point made in the *Kevaddha-sutta* is thus not a rejection of supernormal abilities as such, but only of their public display for ulterior motives.

This much could also be gleaned from the above-mentioned *Vinaya* rules. In fact, according to a discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* not only the Buddha himself, but a considerable number of his disciples were similarly endowed with all three of these extraordinary feats (AN I 172). Other discourses proclaim that a monk endowed with ability in these three extraordinary feats deserved to be reckoned as supreme among gods and men (AN I 292 and AN V 327). These passages further support the impression that what is rejected are not such supernormal abilities in themselves, but only their public display for the sake of worldly benefits.

A distinction in regard to the motivation behind performing a supernormal feat can also be seen when comparing two other supernormal performances recorded in the *Vinaya*. In the first of these two cases, the monk Pilindavaccha had changed a

piece of grass into a golden garland in order to assuage the grief of a little girl in the house of his supporters, who due to poverty was not able to adorn herself like the other girls in the village (Vin I 208). When the king found out that the poor family was in possession of a golden garland he had the whole family arrested, suspecting them to be thieves. Pilindavaccha thereon visited the king and changed the whole palace into gold in order to prove that the poor family could come to possess a golden garland without thievery. As a result of this display of supernormal abilities, the family was released.

The *Vinaya* does not record any reproach by the Buddha of these two instances of exhibition of supernormal abilities, but rather tackles the problem of how his fellow monks should handle the abundant supplies that as a result of Pilindavaccha's displays had accrued to them.

The second case in the *Vinaya*, however, involves a supernormal feat displayed for the sake of self-exhibition. Here the monk Piṇḍolabhāradvāja had exhibited his magical powers through an act of levitation in order to obtain a costly sandalwood bowl that was hanging at the top of a high pole (Vin II 111). The bowl had been set as a prize by a merchant for any recluse or Brahmin able to reach it through the exercise of supernormal ability. Piṇḍolabhāradvāja's act incurred the Buddha's censure, who compared it to a woman who exhibits her private parts for payment.

The difference in treatment between the magical feats performed by Pilindavaccha and Piṇḍolabhāradvāja further corroborates the impression that criticism of such feats is levied at public exhibition for the sake of worldly benefits, not at magical abilities per se.

In fact, the performance of wondrous and supernormal feats is a recurrent feature in the early discourses and other *Vinaya* passages. These depict how the Buddha performed a magical

feat in order to hide Yasa from the sight of his father (Vin I 16); or how the Buddha miraculously hid himself from the sight of a Brahmā (MN I 330). Through another act of supernormal power the Buddha was able to keep at bay Aṅgulimāla, who was in hot pursuit intending to kill the Buddha (MN II 99); and a whole series of miracles happened when the Buddha was staying with Uruvelakassapa (Vin I 24).

Among the Buddha's disciples, Mahāmoggallāna was apparently particularly gifted in this respect, able to shake the palace of the thirty-three gods as well as a monastic building with his toe (MN I 253 and SN V 270).

A discourse in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* reports how another monk conjured up a cool breeze to enable his fellow monks to return comfortably to the monastery after a heavy dinner on a hot day (SN IV 289). When the donor of the meal asked for further performances, the same monk produced fire that burnt up grass piled on top of the donor's cloth, without harming the cloth.

Another monk by the name of Cūlapanthaka was apparently able to multiply himself (Th 563), and the *Vinaya* reports that Devadatta magically changed his appearance in order to impress King Ajātasattu (Vin II 185). These few examples already suffice to show the degree to which supernormal feats and wonders are an integral part of the thought-world of early Buddhism.

In fact, the ability to perform various supernormal feats is part of the account of the gradual path given in the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* and several other discourses in the *Dīgha-nikāya* (DN I 77). The *Mahāsakuludāyi-sutta* similarly includes such abilities in its description of the Buddha's teachings (MN II 18), as does the *Sampasādanīya-sutta* (DN III 112). The same discourse, however, also makes the pertinent point that, when contrasted to mastery over the mind's tendency to react with

likes and dislikes, such supernormal powers are clearly inferior.

The keen interest among ancient Indians in the display of supernormal abilities is also reflected in the *Pāṭika-sutta*, according to which Sunakkhatta decided to leave the Buddhist order because he thought that the Buddha had not shown him any supernormal ability (DN III 3). According to the same discourse, the Buddha clarified that he had never promised to make any such display, and that his teaching leads to freedom from *dukkha* independent of any supernormal performances. The same discourse then continues by reporting several occasions when the Buddha did avail himself of supernormal abilities, culminating in an account of how the Buddha rose up into the air and emitted flames (DN III 27).

The importance given to the possession of supernormal abilities in ancient India is also reflected in the *Susīma-sutta*, according to which a wanderer by the name of Susīma had become a Buddhist monk in order to spy out the Buddha's teaching. When other monks declared to have won final knowledge, Susīma was surprised to find that they would make such claims in spite of being unable to avail themselves of supernatural powers, or of telepathic knowledge of the mind of others, etc. (SN II 123).

Some contemporaries of the Buddha, like the Brahmin Pokkharasāti, apparently held that humans are not able to reach any supernormal abilities (MN II 201). Yet, according to a discourse in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* even Buddhist lay followers, like the householder Citta, had been able to reach a whole range of 'supernormal abilities', comprising the four absorptions and realization of the first three stages of awakening (SN IV 301).

These are in fact the types of supernormal abilities that stand at the very heart of early Buddhism, and it would be such at-

tainments that a discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* has in view when listing ten reflections that a monk or nun should regularly undertake (AN V 88), the tenth of which is to question oneself if any supernormal abilities have been attained, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of noble ones.

In short, then, early Buddhism recognizes the ability to perform supernormal feats based on the development of high levels of concentration. According to the early discourses and the *Vinaya*, the Buddha himself and various disciples repeatedly availed themselves of such abilities.

Yet, the public display of such abilities for worldly motives is censured as unbefitting. The same censure also covers public proclamation of having attained supernormal abilities in the more restricted sense of being able to attain absorption or having realized one of the stages of awakening, even though to attain these is central to the undertaking of the Buddhist path to liberation.

9.4 Concentration and Awakening

The role of concentration as a crucial factor for the gaining of awakening is a frequent theme in the discourses, which reiterate again and again that no insight can be developed without concentration. Concentration precedes knowledge (AN I 219) and it is only with a concentrated mind that things can be seen as they really are (SN IV 80). The role of concentration in this respect also underlies its inclusion among the seven factors of awakening.

As a factor of awakening, levels of concentration with and without initial and sustained application of the mind can be employed (SN V 111). The awakening factor of concentration is the result of tranquillity and happiness and in turn leads to equanimity, a balanced state of mind that results from concen-

tration (SN V 69). The two factors especially related to concentration as a factor of awakening are the "sign of tranquillity" and the "sign of non-distraction" (SN V 105).

Another important set of mental factors where concentration also plays its part are the five faculties or powers. A definition given frequently for concentration as a faculty speaks of gaining concentration by "making relinquishment the object" (e.g. SN V 197), providing in this way an indication of considerable practical relevance. When considered from the perspective of the interrelation between the five faculties, the role of concentration in this context is to counterbalance the faculty of energy, thereby avoiding the arising of agitation and excitement.

Concentration is not only of relevance in relation to the roads to power, the awakening factors and the faculties, but it also has a crucial role to perform in the context of the noble eightfold path, of which it forms the last and culminating factor.

The discourses define "right concentration" in two complementary ways. The most frequently found definition enumerates the four absorptions. Since the development of the noble eightfold path, and with it of the path factor "right concentration", is a prerequisite for awakening, this definition clearly accords a central role to the development of absorption within the early Buddhist scheme of deliverance.

Since some discourses describe the gaining of full awakening based on the first absorption (see MN I 350; MN I 435; AN IV 422 and AN V 343), it would follow that not all four absorptions have to be developed to win full awakening. All four absorptions would however be needed to gain the threefold higher knowledge (*tevijjā*).

Another definition of right concentration, found in a few discourses, does not mention the absorptions (see DN II 217; MN III 71; SN V 21 and AN IV 40). One of these discourses is the

Mahācattārīsaka-sutta, a discourse which defines right concentration as unification of the mind (*cittassekaggatā*) developed in interdependence with the other seven path-factors (MN III 71). This definition highlights the fact that in order for concentration to become 'right' concentration, it needs to be developed as part of the noble eightfold path.

Judging from other discourses, the expression 'unification of the mind' is not confined to absorption concentration, since the same expression occurs in relation to walking and standing (AN II 14) or to listening to the *Dhamma* (AN III 175), activities which would not be compatible with absorption attainment. This suggests that this second definition of 'right concentration' would also include levels of *samādhi* that have not yet reached the depth of absorption concentration. In fact, the formulation of this second definition makes it clear that the decisive factor qualifying concentration as 'right' is not merely the depth of concentration achieved, but the purpose for which concentration is employed.

A similar nuance underlies the qualification *sammā*, 'right', which literally means "togetherness", or to be "connected in one". This thus indicates that the criterion for describing concentration as *sammā*, as 'right', is whether it is developed 'together' with the other factors of the noble eightfold path. Of central importance here is the presence of right view, as the forerunner of the whole path, without whose implementation concentration can never be reckoned *sammā*.

According to numerous discourses (e.g. AN III 423), the development of the path factor of 'right concentration' is indispensable for eradicating the fetters and gaining awakening. This brings up the question whether it is necessary to develop *samādhi* to the level of absorption in order to attain any of the four stages of awakening.

Concerning stream-entry, the qualities mentioned in the discourses as essential for the realization of stream-entry do not stipulate the ability to attain absorption (cf. SN V 410). Nor is such an ability included among the qualities that are characteristic of a stream-enterer subsequent to realization (cf. e.g. SN V 357). A necessary condition for winning stream-entry is a state of mind completely free from the five hindrances (AN III 63). Such a removal, however, can take place during walking meditation (It 118) or while listening to the *Dhamma* (SN V 95). This indicates that the ability to gain absorption concentration would not be required for stream-entry.

The same seems to apply to the realization of once-return. Once-returners are so called because they will be reborn only once again in "this world", i.e. the sensual realm. On the other hand, those who have developed the ability to attain absorption are not going to return to "this world" in their next life (AN II 126), but will be reborn in a higher heavenly sphere (i.e. the form realm or the immaterial realm).

This certainly does not imply that a once-returner cannot have absorption attainments. But if all once-returners were absorption attainers, the very concept of a 'once-returner' would be superfluous, since not a single once-returner would ever return 'to this world'. That once-returners do indeed come back to 'this world' is documented in passages that report the rebirth of once-returners in the Tusita realm (AN III 348 and AN V 138).

Hence, although some once-returners may have attained absorption, this does not appear to have been the rule. The same then evidently holds for stream-enterers, in fact the most advanced out of a listing of stream-enterers, the "one-seeder", will be reborn in the human world (AN IV 380), not in a higher heavenly sphere.

When considering the realization of non-return, however, the situation seems to be different. Some discourses point out that the non-returner, in contrast to the once-returner, has fulfilled the development of concentration (AN I 232 and AN IV 380). This indicates that the difference between the two is related to differing levels of concentrative ability. Other discourses relate progress towards the higher two stages of the path, non-returning and full awakening, to having had the experience of the first or higher absorptions.

A particularly explicit statement can be found in the *Mahāmāluṅkya-sutta*, according to which it is impossible to overcome the five higher fetters without undertaking the path required for such overcoming, and this path is contemplation of an absorption experience from an insight perspective (MN I 435). Without having attained absorption, such contemplation can obviously not be undertaken.

The need for the absorptions in order to be able to reach full awakening is also stipulated in the *Sekha-sutta* (MN I 357). The same position is reflected in the opening section of a discourse that describes various approaches to full awakening, which are invariably based on the experience of absorption or an immaterial attainment (AN IV 422).

Judging from this, the development of concentration up to the level of absorption appears to be required for the realization of non-return and thereby also of full awakening. Thus, at least from the perspective of the early discourses, it seems that the so-called "dry insight" approach, which dispenses with the formal development of mental tranquillity up to the level of at least the first absorption, may not be capable of leading to full liberation, but might suffice only for stream-entry and once-return.

In fact, if absorption were simply irrelevant to the progress of insight up to full awakening, it would be difficult to understand

why its practice and development have been given so much attention in the discourses, and why the four absorptions are included under the heading of right concentration as one of the factors of the noble eightfold path.

In sum, the foregoing survey shows that the development of deeper levels of concentration constitutes an important aspect of the meditative training of the mind in early Buddhism and can offer a range of potential benefits.

The importance to be accorded to the development of concentration is expressed vividly in some discourses, which proclaim that one who has respect for the Buddha and his teaching will automatically hold concentration in high regard (AN IV 123). On the other hand, one who looks down on the development of concentration thereby only approves of those who have an unsteady mind (AN II 31). Lack of regard for the development of concentration, so another discourse explains, constitutes one of the causes for the disappearance of the true *Dhamma* (SN II 225). In short, concentration is the path and to be without concentration is the wrong path (AN III 420).

10. Seclusion / *Viveka*

Viveka as "seclusion" is accorded a high value in early Buddhism. A discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* proclaims that the Buddha's teaching is for one who is secluded, not for one who delights in company (AN IV 229). According to another discourse in the same collection, whatever leads to seclusion instead of company should be considered categorically as the true teaching of the Buddha (AN IV 280). The emphasis given in such statements to a secluded life style has its poetic counterpart in the *Khaggavisāṇa-sutta* of the *Sutta-nipāta*, which offers a touching eulogy of the beauty of a solitary life (Sn 35-75).

In what follows, I at first survey the implications of living in physical seclusion, then turn to the theme of silence, followed by exploring mental seclusion.

10.1 Living in Seclusion

The *Mahāsakuludāyi-sutta* reports that some of the Buddha's disciples would only come to join the community every fortnight for the recital of the code of rules (MN II 9). Other passages indicate that monks who live secluded and encourage others in the same quality are praiseworthy indeed (AN V 130). A verse in the *Sutta-nipāta* emphatically instructs that one should dwell in seclusion, which is [reckoned] the supreme form of dwelling among noble ones (Sn 822). Even just to talk about seclusion is commendable, since such a topic for conversation will lead onwards to the final goal (MN III 115).

Hence a monk who does not dwell in solitude nor praises such dwelling had apparently little chance in early Buddhism of being liked and respected by his companions (AN V 166). Even for a monk in higher training seclusion is important, since if he is engaged in many activities and neglects seclusion, decline is to be expected of him (AN III 116). Particularly blameworthy is neglect of seclusion when one's teacher is devoted to a secluded living style. Such blame applies to elder disciples as well as younger ones, in that they do not emulate the example set by their teacher (MN I 14).

To set an example was in fact a prominent reason why the Buddha would live in seclusion himself, in addition to the pleasure he found in secluded dwellings (MN I 23 and AN I 60). The discourses report that after his awakening the Buddha still went regularly on solitary retreat, at times for two weeks (Vin III 68; SN V 12; SN V 320), and at other times even for a period of three months (Vin III 230; SN V 13; SN V 325). Other discourses indicate that distinguished visitors were not allowed to approach the Buddha even when he was only in his daily retreat (DN I 151; DN II 270).

If the Buddha felt being too crowded in by disciples and visitors, he would simply walk off on his own to stay somewhere else in solitude and seclusion (Ud 41). A similar action would also be undertaken by some of his senior disciples, who on one occasion left without taking their leave of the Buddha in order to avoid a crowd of visitors that had come to see the Buddha (AN V 133). On being later informed about their departure, the Buddha wholeheartedly approved of their action.

The secluded living style of the Buddha was a natural expression of his realization, so much so that the two thoughts a Tathāgata frequently has in his mind are thoughts of peace and of seclusion (It 31). In fact, to live a secluded life style is, ac-

cording to the *Udumbarikasīhanāda-sutta*, a characteristic of all those who have reached awakening (DN III 54).

Yet, to dwell in seclusion is not an easy task, and one who is bereft of concentration will not be fit for this life style (AN V 202), just as a small animal is not fit to imitate the behaviour of an elephant. The *Bhayabherava-sutta* lists several other qualities that will make it difficult to live in seclusion, such as lack of moral purity, or else being under the influence of the five hindrances or of various other unwholesome mental states (MN I 17).

What appears to be implicit in these passages is made explicit in a discourse in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya*, which indicates that to live in community is only a second-rate alternative, recommended to those who do not find solace in seclusion. The verse in question enjoins: "Dwell in remote lodgings, practice for freedom from the fetters, [but] if one does not find satisfaction therein, [then] dwell in the community, protected and mindful" (SN I 154).

Thus dwelling in seclusion is an expression of having reached some degree of maturity in one's practice. Such maturity can, however, arise at a rather early stage in one's practice. The *Vinaya* recognizes this, as it gives a special allowance for a newly ordained monk to be exempted from the otherwise obligatory need to live in dependence on a teacher, in case he finds solace in living in seclusion in a remote forest dwelling (Vin I 92).

Seclusion also comes up in the context of a simile that employs various parts of an elephant to represent praiseworthy qualities. Here seclusion is represented by the elephant's tail (AN III 346), whose function is to keep off flies. In another imagery that takes up the parts of a war chariot, seclusion is one of the weapons of this chariot, together with the absence of ill-will and harmlessness (SN V 6).

Thus seclusion affords the protective environment for intensive and deep meditation practice by keeping off disturbances, comparable to the elephant's tail that keeps off flies. At the same time, seclusion is a necessary equipment for the battle with one's own defilements, similar to the weaponry of the war-chariot. Needless to say, in this battle seclusion cooperates with the absence of ill-will and harmfulness, two qualities that would make it clear in what respect such a spiritual battle differs from real warfare.

For one who does not delight in seclusion, it will be impossible to come to grips with the mind and develop concentration (AN III 423). The *Mahāsuññata-sutta* clarifies that delight in company will obstruct experiencing the happiness of seclusion (MN III 110). Such seclusion from sensuality, *vivicc' eva kāmehi*, is a necessary condition for attaining absorption. In fact, the happiness experienced with the attainment of the first absorption is none other than the happiness of seclusion (MN I 454). According to a verse in the *Theragāthā*, living alone in the seclusion of a forest, as praised by the Buddha, is very pleasant indeed, once before and behind no one else is found (Th 537-538).

10.2 Silence

An aspect of conduct closely related to seclusion is the maintenance of silence. The disciples of the Buddha were apparently well known among their contemporaries for the high regard they had for silent behaviour (e.g. MN I 514). Thus the *Kandaraka-sutta* reports how a visiting wanderer expressed his admiration for the silence of the congregation of monks (MN I 339). The silent behaviour of the Buddhist monks even caused suspicion to arise in the mind of a king, who on being led to the vicinity of a large assembly of Buddhist monks feared being ambushed, as he could not imagine that such a great con-

gregation could maintain total silence (DN I 50). Even the gods knew about the reputation for silence of the disciples of the Buddha, and on one occasion Sakka praises the Buddhist monks as silent ones (SN I 236).

Such silent behaviour of the Buddhist monks reflects an injunction by the Buddha that his disciples should either converse on the *Dhamma* or else keep noble silence (MN I 161). "Noble silence" in its true sense, however, would require attaining the second absorption (SN II 273), since it is only when the last vestige of mental activity has been abandoned through overcoming initial and sustained mental application that total inner silence has been attained.

Yet, silence for its own sake was apparently not approved of by the Buddha. According to the *Mahāvagga* of the *Vinaya*, he criticized a group of monks for having spent the three months of the rainy season together in silence, comparing their behaviour to dumb sheep (Vin I 159). This passage needs to be examined in conjunction with the *Cūḷagosiṅga-sutta* and the *Upakkilesa-sutta*, two discourses in which the silent cohabitation of a group of monks met with the Buddha’s explicit approval (MN I 207 and MN III 157). This shows that it was not the fact of observing silence as such that was found objectionable in the case of the monks in the *Mahāvagga*.

In fact, silence at the proper time is an aspect of proper monastic conduct, such as when a monk stands silently in front of a house while begging (SN I 174). Silence also forms part of proper behaviour in general, since when being in any assembly one should know when it is time to just keep silent (AN IV 115). A common occurrence of silence is as an expression of agreement, when an invitation is accepted by remaining silent (e.g. DN I 109). Even after partaking of a meal, the Buddha would remain seated for a short time in silence (MN II 139). In

the end, then, silence as such does not appear to be censurable in the thought-world of early Buddhism.

A helpful detail for understanding the event reported in the *Mahāvagga* can be found by consulting the parallel version in the (Mūla-)Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya*. This parallel version reports that these monks had taken a vow to live together in silence in the sense that they would not criticize each other even in the case of a breach of conduct (T XXIII 1044c16 or D *'dul ba ka* 222a1). This suggests that the criticism of their behaviour was directed against the foolish idea that to live together in harmony is to simply ignore improper behaviour.

What becomes clear from the criticism voiced in the *Mahāvagga* is that the observance of silence needs to be paired with wisdom, a requirement that is also evident in the circumstance that, according to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, clear comprehension should be practiced when keeping silent (MN I 57). As a verse in the *Dhammapada* points out, one does not become a sage by dint of mere silence (Dhp 268).

Though silence undertaken just for its own sake and without wisdom was not encouraged, silence as an expression of deeper realization was certainly valued in early Buddhism. A discourse in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* reports the complaints of a *deva* that a monk, who earlier was regularly reciting the *Dhamma*, had fallen silent. In reply, the monk explained that he had stopped reciting because he had reached realization (SN I 202).

According to another discourse in the same collection, a group of monks had come to the Buddha to complain that a newly ordained monk was keeping silently to himself, without taking part in communal activities such as sewing robes. The Buddha exonerated the monk, explaining that he was an arahant who was spending his time immersed in absorption (SN II 278).

10.3 Mental Seclusion

The practice of bodily seclusion and silence thus has the purpose of providing a basis for developing mental seclusion. In fact, as a discourse in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* points out, bodily seclusion alone does not suffice. According to this discourse, a monk who lives a very solitary life should also make an effort at mental solitude by leaving behind past and future, and by dwelling free from desire in the present (SN II 283).

The need to supplement bodily seclusion with mental seclusion is also the theme of a set of three similes in the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta* (MN I 240). This set of similes employs the image of a piece of wood that cannot be used to kindle a fire as long as the wood is still wet. This holds true when the wood is still lying in water, but also when the wood has been taken out of the water but is still wet. Only a piece of wood that has become dry is fit for the fire.

Here the need for bodily withdrawal from sensuality corresponds to the need of taking the wood out of the water. Yet, just as the wood also needs to be dry, in the same way the mind needs to be withdrawn from thoughts related to sensuality. As a discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* points out, one who lives in a secluded spot while at the same time still entertaining unwholesome thoughts is only bodily subdued, but lacks being mentally subdued (AN II 137).

Hence based on having heard the teachings, one should dwell bodily as well as mentally withdrawn in order to develop wisdom (AN IV 152). Such withdrawal is a recurrent feature in the description of a monk who, after having received an enigmatic teaching from the Buddha, dwells alone and withdrawn and thereby reaches liberation (e.g. SN III 36).

The Buddha's disciples are encouraged to undertake such secluded practice, for the simple reason that one who lives in se-

clusion will come to know things as they truly are (SN III 15 or SN IV 80). It could well be for the same reason that the *Dhamma* is said to be realized by the wise each for themselves, that is, singly (e.g. DN II 93).

"The way of the crowd is the way of *saṃsāra* ... against the centripetal attraction of *saṃsāra* ... a tangent directly away from the enveloping vortex into calmness ... this is *kāyaviveka*". Such bodily seclusion then is the basis for developing mental seclusion, "*cittaviveka* ... that gradual journey [away] from the *saṃsāra* within that fuels the outer" *saṃsāra*. Hence "only by solitude ... can one truly approach the Dhamma in its immediacy" (Hudson 1976: 103-104).

The theme of seclusion also has a prominent role to play in relation to higher stages in the development of insight, as the factors of awakening should be developed in dependence on seclusion in order to lead to liberation (MN III 88).

A survey of different types of seclusion can be found in a discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, which distinguishes between three levels of *vivekā* (AN I 241). The first of these is seclusion from unwholesome deeds through virtuous conduct. Next comes seclusion from wrong view through attainment of right view. The third level of seclusion, then, is seclusion from the influxes through final liberation. For an arahant, to be intent on seclusion becomes the most appropriate expression of his or her total seclusion from defilements (AN III 377).

"Having savoured the taste of seclusion,
And the taste of [inner] peace,
[One who] is free from anxiety and evil,
Savours the joyful taste of the *Dhamma*"
(Dhp 205 or Sn 257).

11. Letting go / *Vossagga*

The term *vossagga* stands for "letting go", in the sense of relinquishing, forsaking, or renouncing. Similar to the closely related *paṭinissagga*, "giving up", *vossagga* has a considerable scope of meaning in early Buddhism. Both terms can be seen to throw into relief a central theme that underlies the path to liberation from its outset to its final completion, namely the need to quite literally "let go" of any clinging whatsoever. In what follows, I first examine the implications of "letting go", *vossagga*, followed by turning to "giving up", *paṭinissagga*.

11.1 Letting go

Letting go in a relatively mundane sense is part of a set of recommendations given in the *Siṅgālovāda-sutta*, according to which a householder should hand over authority to his wife (DN III 190) and grant leave to his workers at the right time (DN III 191).

These practical instructions already involve a deeper sense of letting go, since in both instances what has to be let go of is control, whether this is in household affairs by handing over authority to the wife, or in labour matters by allowing the workers to take their leave. The desire to control that might render such letting go difficult is in fact simply a manifestation of clinging to a sense of 'I'. Hence even with such mundane types of letting go, as in the present instance, a step is already taken in the direction of what according to early Buddhism needs above all to be given up: clinging to a sense of 'I'.

A correlate to clinging to an 'I' notion is the sense of ownership towards goods and possessions, as well as people, by grasping these as 'mine'. To gradually undermine this sense of ownership, letting go is repeatedly recommended in the early discourses.

Letting go of grasping at one's possessions leads to generosity, which manifests by "delighting in letting go", in the sense of "delighting in giving and sharing" (SN V 395). To be willing to let go in this way will become a source for a good reputation (AN I 226) and lead to a heavenly rebirth (AN IV 266).

Having undertaken such letting go in the form of generosity in an earlier life was one out of the factors due to which Sakka was reborn as the ruler in the heaven of the Thirty-three (SN I 228). The same form of letting go through generosity is also a clear token of faith for a Buddhist disciple (AN I 150), in fact such generosity even features in listings of the four aspects of stream-entry (SN V 397). Having undertaken such letting go of one's possessiveness can then also be turned into an object of meditation, when one practices recollection of one's own generosity (AN III 287).

This does not yet exhaust the relevance of letting go to meditation practice. According to the canonical definition of the faculty of concentration, it is by "having made letting go the object" of one's mind that "one gains concentration and unification of the mind" (SN V 198). The passage that offers this definition continues with the standard description of the four absorptions, thereby indicating that the benefits of such letting go are the gain of concentrative depth of the mind.

In relation to the development of concentration, to let go would stand for letting go of concern with the world of the senses, first of all, and eventually also for letting go of the subjective sense of 'I'. Only once this sense of 'I' goes into abeyance, allowing for a subjective experience of a merger between

observing subject and observed meditative object, will entry into absorption become possible. Preconditions for developing such letting go into deep meditative absorption are faith, energy and mindfulness (SN V 225).

Letting go also has a significant contribution to make in regard to the development of insight. This role comes to the fore in those passages that describe how the seven factors of awakening are to be developed in order to lead to knowledge and liberation. Such development of the factors of awakening should be undertaken based on seclusion, dispassion and cessation, culminating in letting go (e.g. MN III 88).

The same set – being based on seclusion, dispassion and cessation, and culminating in letting go – is relevant not only for the development of the seven factors of awakening, but also for developing the five faculties, the five powers, and for the practice of the noble eightfold path (e.g. SN IV 365-368).

11.2 Giving up

Of similar importance in the thought-world of early Buddhism is *paṭinissagga*, "giving up". Before exploring the range of implications of such giving up, however, it needs to be noted that a discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* makes a point of specifying that not all forms of giving up are recommendable. The type of giving up that leads to an increase in unwholesomeness should be avoided, and only the giving up that leads to an increase in wholesomeness should be undertaken (AN V 192). The same is certainly also the case for letting go.

Thus neither letting go nor giving up are to be practiced indiscriminately. Instead, both should be combined with a clear understanding of their purpose: increase in wholesome qualities and removal of unwholesome qualities.

While the term letting go occurs more frequently in recommendations to let go of material possessions through practising generosity, giving up makes its appearance often in relation to the need to give up views. Thus various views about the past and the future are better given up (MN II 235); in fact the whole of the *Sallekha-sutta* sets out on the theme of giving up certain views (MN I 40). This theme is also prominent in the treatment given to views in the *Dīghanakha-sutta* (MN I 499). The profundity of this injunction becomes apparent in the concluding section of this discourse, according to which Sāriputta reached full liberation on realizing that the Buddha's recommendation implied giving up through penetrative insight (MN I 501).

A company where right speech prevails is one whose members are able to give up their views instead of insisting on them dogmatically (AN I 76). Those who dogmatically hold on to their views will find it difficult to implement such giving up (e.g. MN I 96). The importance of being able to give up one's view is also reflected in several regulations in the *Vinaya*, which deal with monks or nuns who hold on to views that are mistaken or could lead to a schism (Vin III 173; Vin III 175; Vin III 178; Vin III 184; Vin IV 135; Vin IV 218; Vin IV 236; Vin IV 238; Vin IV 239; Vin IV 241; Vin IV 294).

In the context of actual meditation, giving up makes its appearance as the last of the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing. In this context, giving up is preceded by contemplation of impermanence, fading away and cessation (MN III 83). A similar series of progressive steps in the development of insight can, on being applied to feelings in general, lead to freedom from clinging to anything in the world and hence to liberation (MN I 251).

In relation to pleasant feelings, such giving up will lead to overcoming the underlying tendency to lust. In relation to pain-

ful feelings, giving up will result in overcoming the underlying tendency to irritation, and in relation to neutral feelings in overcoming the underlying tendency to ignorance (SN IV 211). Hence whatever feelings are experienced, the task is to contemplate their impermanence and eventually give up all involvement with and attachment to them.

Not only in relation to feelings, but anything in the world of experience is best faced with an attitude of giving up. This can be seen in the sections in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* entitled *Rāgapeyyāla*s, which list an impressive range of practices that are related to the basic principle of giving up. After enumerating a fairly comprehensive set of defilements, the *Rāgapeyyāla*s indicate that to 'give up' these defilements can be undertaken through developing:

- tranquillity and insight (AN I 100),
- empty, signless, or undirected concentration (AN I 299),
- the four establishments of mindfulness (AN II 256),
- the four right efforts (AN II 256),
- the four roads to [spiritual] power (AN II 256),
- the five faculties (AN III 277),
- the five powers (AN III 277),
- the six recollections (AN III 452),
- the seven factors of awakening (AN IV 148),
- the noble eightfold path (AN IV 348),
- the four absorptions (AN IV 465),
- the four divine abodes (AN V 360),
- the four immaterial attainments (AN V 360),
- the eight spheres of transcendence (AN IV 348),
- the eight liberations (AN IV 349),
- the attainment of cessation (AN IV 465),
- various types of insight related perceptions (AN III 277; AN III 452; AN IV 148; AN IV 465; AN V 310).

Hence giving up, similar to letting go, spans the whole scale of meditative development. Perfecting giving up, then, requires giving up all craving, whereby the mind will be thoroughly liberated (SN III 13). Such giving up is the theme of the third noble truth, according to which the eradication of *dukkha* requires giving up craving (e.g. SN V 421). It was through such giving up of craving and of any sense of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ that the Buddha reached supreme awakening (MN I 6 and MN I 486).

In short, letting go and giving up can be seen to highlight the same theme from complementary perspectives, in that both are of continuous relevance to progress towards liberation. The final goal of such progressive letting go and giving up is but a culmination of the same basic attitude, as can be seen from one of the epithets used to describe the final goal as the "giving up of all substrata" (e.g. MN I 436).

That is, letting go or giving up, if practised wisely in such a way that they result in a growth of wholesome qualities, could be considered a succinct way of representing the central thrust of the teachings of early Buddhism.

"Giving up acquisitiveness,
And delighting in not clinging,
[With] influxes destroyed and brilliant [with wisdom],
These have attained *Nibbāna* in this world" (Dhp 89).

12. Emptiness / *Suññatā*

Suññatā is an abstract noun formed from the adjective *suñña*, which means "empty" or "void". It is noteworthy that in the Pāli discourses the adjective *suñña* occurs with a much higher frequency than the corresponding noun *suññatā*. This is not a matter of mere philological interest, but points to an emphasis in early Buddhism on qualifying phenomena as 'being empty' rather than on an abstract state of empty-'ness'.

My examination in the following pages proceeds from an investigation of the significance of the qualification 'empty' in early Buddhism via a study of the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta* and the *Mahāsuññata-sutta* to a survey of other early discourses related to emptiness.

12.1 The Significance of the Term 'Empty'

The word empty (*suñña*) occurs often in a straightforward and simple sense to qualify a location as empty in the most common sense of the word. A typical example for this is a recurrent reference in the discourses to an 'empty place', which due to being devoid of people, noise, distraction, etc. is a place suitable for meditative seclusion (DN II 291). To find delight in the seclusion afforded by such an empty place counts as an important requirement for one gone forth (AN V 88). The same quality, however, renders such an empty place less suitable as a resort for gathering alms (MN I 519) or for proclaiming one's teachings (DN I 175).

According to another usage of a similar type, as long as there are those who undertake the noble eightfold path, the world will not be empty of arahants (DN II 151). The quality of being empty can also be predicated of a group of people, in order to specify that they are bereft of a certain quality. Thus, the members of a particular group of ascetics can be reckoned as being empty of going to heaven, in the sense that none of them will be able to reach a celestial rebirth (MN I 483).

Though qualifying a place or a group of people as empty of something may at first sight appear to be far from the deeper connotations of emptiness, the two senses are actually intertwined. To speak of emptiness, as far as the early discourses are concerned, is necessarily to speak of a particular phenomenon as empty of something.

Hence even the peak of emptiness, the realization of full awakening and unsurpassable mental freedom, is "empty of". Empty of what? Empty of lust, anger and delusion (MN I 298).

Some passages use the expression empty in both a common and a deeper sense, for example when employing the image of an empty village as a symbol for the six sense-bases (SN IV 173). Though the primary sense of *suñña* here is clearly to be physically empty, in the sense that this village has been deserted by people, the discourse in question brings in the deeper notions of *suñña* by explaining that when a wise person investigates the senses he or she will find that they are empty, void and vain. In this way the empty quality of the village, in the sense of being devoid of people, finds its equivalent in the empty nature of the senses, highlighting that the senses are devoid of a self.

A similar nuance can also be found in a set of similes for the five aggregates found in the *Pheṇa-sutta*. Though this discourse does not use the term *suñña*, it does employ two terms used as near equivalents of *suñña* in the above simile of the

empty village: void and vain. According to the *Pheṇa-sutta*, closer inspection will reveal each of the five aggregates to be vain, void and unsubstantial. The same discourse offers a set of similes illustrative of the manifestation of this void and vain nature of each aggregate:

The unsubstantial nature of material form is similar to a lump of foam carried away by a river; feelings are like the impermanent bubbles that arise on the surface of water during rain; perception is as illusory as a mirage; volitions are devoid of essence like a plantain tree (since it has no heartwood); and consciousness is as deceptive as a magician's performance (SN III 142). The *Pheṇa-sutta* concludes with a verse envisaging eradication of the fetters and attainment of the final goal as the potential outcome of contemplating the void and unsubstantial nature of the aggregates in this manner.

12.2 The *Cūḷasuññata-sutta*

A lead over from the empty nature of a location to deeper aspects of emptiness as a step by step meditative development can be found in the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta*, the "Smaller Discourse on Emptiness" (MN III 104). This discourse begins with Ānanda inquiring about an earlier statement by the Buddha, according to which the Buddha was often "dwelling in emptiness".

In order to show Ānanda how to achieve such dwelling, the Buddha directs Ānanda's attention to the immediate environment where they are staying. He points out that the place is empty of the human hustle and bustle of township. Giving attention to this absence as a type of emptiness experience yields a unitary perception of the forest.

Based on such a unitary perception of the forest, a meditative deepening of emptiness unfolds. This proceeds from a unitary

perception of earth, via the four immaterial attainments, to signless concentration of the mind.

Each step of this meditative deepening of emptiness requires a clear awareness of what has been transcended at each point, in the sense of what the present experience is "empty of". When, for example, the perception of earth has been transcended by developing the perception of boundless space, this experience of boundless space is seen as empty of any perceptual experience of earth.

The meditative deepening of emptiness described in this discourse requires at the same time a clear awareness of what is still present. Thus, when proceeding from the perception of earth to the perception of boundless space, the experience of boundless space is seen as "not empty" (*asuñña*) of the perception of space. It is precisely this 'non-emptiness' that needs to be left behind in order to proceed further.

Leaving behind the 'non-emptiness' of the perception of space leads to the next experience, namely to attaining the perception of boundless consciousness. This step, then, is "empty of" perceptions of boundless space. Yet, this same experience is "not empty", in so far as the perception of boundless consciousness is still present.

Properly undertaking this genuine, undistorted, pure and gradual descent into emptiness will lead to the destruction of the influxes. Once this has been achieved and one's experiences are forever "empty of" any perception coloured by these unwholesome influxes, the supreme and unsurpassable peak of emptiness has been reached.

This presentation in the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta* has several important ramifications and thus well deserves to be reckoned outstanding among discourses that are "related to [the topic] of

emptiness" and therefore worthy of special attention (SN II 267; SN V 407; AN I 72 and AN III 107).

One of these implications is that the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta*'s treatment shows the early Buddhist concept of emptiness to stand for a qualification, not an entity. This is reflected in the repeated instruction that the meditating monk is to consider his experiences as "empty of" what has been transcended, but at the same time as "not empty of" what is still there.

In fact, the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta* employs the Pāli term *suññatā* only once the peak of realization through the destruction of the influxes has been reached. In contrast, the description of all the preceding stages merely uses the adjective *suñña*, "empty". This indicates that the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta* reckons only the destruction of the influxes as "emptiness", furthermore qualified as "unsurpassable". The preceding stages are only the "entry into emptiness", but nothing short of total freedom from the influxes deserves to be reckoned as "emptiness" true and proper.

Other Pāli discourses also use the term "emptiness" predominantly in relation to various realization experiences. This nuance can best be seen in the *Vinaya*, which counts the claim to emptiness liberation, emptiness concentration or emptiness attainment among those claims which, if spoken as a deliberate lie, merit expulsion from the monastic community (Vin III 95). This shows that for a monk or a nun to lay claim to such emptiness experience was equivalent to laying claim to high realization.

Another implication of the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta* is that the proper approach to a realization of emptiness, depicted step by step in this discourse and qualified as "genuine, undistorted and pure", is gradual. According to the finale of the discourse, all those who have gained the supreme and unsurpassable peak of emptiness, the destruction of the influxes, have in fact followed this gradual approach.

The final stages of this gradual approach, described in the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta*, lead from signless concentration of the mind to the destruction of the influxes. In order to navigate this important junction, the discourse instructs to contemplate the conditioned and impermanent nature of one's meditative experience. This indicates that, in order to attain the peak of emptiness, insight into conditionality and impermanence need to be developed. Moreover, the resultant insight perspective needs to be directed towards one's own experience of emptiness.

The foregoing thus highlights that contemplation of emptiness has to be combined with the development of insight into the conditioned and impermanent nature of reality, an insight to be applied directly to one's present meditative experience. Other discourses confirm this need. They indicate that even the deepest and most sublime levels of meditative experience have to be contemplated as impermanent and unsatisfactory, in addition to being contemplated as empty (e.g. MN I 435).

12.3 The *Mahāsuññata-sutta*

The need to complement meditation on emptiness with insight into impermanence is also evident in the "Greater Discourse on Emptiness", the *Mahāsuññata-sutta* (MN III 109). In fact, the meditative instruction in relation to emptiness delivered in this discourse culminates in contemplation of the impermanent nature of the five aggregates as the means to go beyond the conceit 'I am'.

It is remarkable that the *Cūḷasuññata-sutta* and the *Mahāsuññata-sutta*, whose titles indicate that their main topic is emptiness, both stress the importance of impermanence. In this way, these two discourses implicitly draw attention to the danger of mistaking the relative stability of deep meditative experiences to be indicative of some type of permanency, a mistake that

can occur even when the object of such deep experiences is of an empty type.

The *Mahāsuññata-sutta* moreover highlights the importance of overcoming the conceit 'I am'. The conceit 'I am' is but a manifestation of ignorance and at the same time the pivotal point for the genesis of craving. The 'I am' conceit thereby stands at the root of the human predicament, and unwholesome mental states and reactions are but its multifarious outgrowths. The idea of selfhood underlying this conceit is the main target for emptiness meditation. Another discourse explains that to qualify the world as empty simply means that it is empty of a self and of what belongs to a self (SN IV 54).

The notion of a self cannot be changed by a mere change of grammar or language. The task is not to replace 'I' with another concept, even if this should be the concept of emptiness. The task, rather, is to become aware of the sense of 'I' pervading experience, a sense of 'I' that turns the process of experiencing into 'I am' experiencing, and causes experience to be appropriated as 'my' experience.

Returning to the *Mahāsuññata-sutta*, the discourse also indicates that contemplation of emptiness has to be applied not only to oneself, "internally", but "externally" as well. Clearly an all-inclusive carrying out of the contemplation is required and every aspect of experience should become part of this comprehensive vision of emptiness.

The same contemplation should, moreover, not be confined to formal meditation, but needs to be related with everyday activities. The *Mahāsuññata-sutta* also indicates how this can be achieved: by staying aloof from desire and aversion while walking, standing, sitting and lying down. In relation to communication, one should avoid useless worldly topics and engage solely in speech related to the practice and the path.

The discourse also clarifies that to develop insight into emptiness means to leave the three unwholesome types of thought behind and to overcome the attractional pull of the five types of sensual pleasure. These instructions clearly indicate that a genuine realization of emptiness is not compatible with engagement in sensuality.

12.4 Other Passages on Emptiness

The need to apply emptiness to everyday activities recurs in the *Piṇḍapātapārisuddhi-sutta* (MN III 294), a discourse also concerned with "dwelling in emptiness". This discourse opens with the Buddha lauding Sāriputta, who has just emerged from emptiness meditation. Proclaiming such dwelling in emptiness to be an abiding of superior men, the Buddha draws attention to the need of combining such meditative depth with everyday activities. As a practical example, the discourse recommends that a monk should stay aloof from desire and aversion in regard to whatever he experiences while begging alms.

The *Piṇḍapātapārisuddhi-sutta* continues by praising aloofness from sensual pleasures. It describes how a monk who has left behind concern for sensual pleasures overcomes the five hindrances, gains insight into the five aggregates and develops different aspects of the early Buddhist path of meditation. Here dwelling in emptiness occurs again within the framework of a comprehensive meditative development that includes both tranquillity and insight.

Contemplation of emptiness as a form of *samādhi* leads to removing all lust, hate and delusion (AN I 299) and thus constitutes the path to the unconditioned (SN IV 360). Such empty concentration often occurs in the discourses as part of a set of three concentrations, together with signless and undirected concentration (DN III 219). Emptiness occurs also together with signlessness and undirectedness as the three types of con-

tact experienced when emerging from the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling (SN IV 295). These presentations underline the point made already above, namely that emptiness as a representative of not-self stands in an inseparable relation to the other two characteristics of existence, impermanence and unsatisfactoriness.

Contemplation of emptiness apparently has some affinity with the third of the four immaterial attainments, the sphere of nothingness, since one of the different ways to reach this deep concentrative experience is through contemplating "this is empty of a self and what belongs to a self" (MN II 263).

The real goal to be achieved by contemplating "this is empty of a self and what belongs to a self", however, is liberation. As a verse in the *Sutta-nipāta* proclaims, by rooting out the view of self and by looking on the entire world of experience as empty, one will be able to transcend even death (Sn 1119).

The same theme, though without explicit use of the term empty, recurs in other verses of the *Sutta-nipāta*, according to which the entire world is without any essence (Sn 937), as are all acquisitions and all forms of existence (Sn 364 and Sn 5).

These statements find their complement in a passage from the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, which defines the "essence" of phenomena to be liberation (AN IV 339). With a subtle sense of humour, this discourse introduces a shift or perspective by taking "essence" to represent what is "essential". What is essential, then, is liberation, which is but the realization of the total absence of any essence in the world.

The teachings on emptiness have also found eloquent expression in early canonical poetry. A verse in the *Dhammapada* takes as its theme those who have reached the acme of emptiness by destroying the influxes. Such accomplished ones, the verse indicates, have emptiness as their resort or pasture. The

implications of having such an empty type of pasture, the verse draws out in the following manner:

> "Those whose pasture is liberation,
> empty and free from any mark,
> their path is hard to track,
> like that of birds in the sky" (Dhp 93).

Abbreviations

AN	*Aṅguttara-nikāya*
D	Derge edition
Dhp	*Dhammapada*
Dhs	*Dhammasaṅgaṇī*
DN	*Dīgha-nikāya*
It	*Itivuttaka*
MN	*Majjhima-nikāya*
Paṭis	*Paṭisambhidāmagga*
Sn	*Sutta-nipāta*
SN	*Saṃyutta-nikāya*
T	Taishō edition
Th	*Theragāthā*
Thī	*Therīgāthā*
Ud	*Udāna*
Vin	*Vinaya*
Vism	*Visuddhimagga*

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